

# Beckett's *Molloy* and *The Odyssey*

K. J. PHILLIPS, *University of Hawaii*

While several of Beckett's critics have spotted a Circe lurking in Lousse or a Cyclops in the policeman, no one to my knowledge has read *Molloy* as a thoroughgoing parody of *The Odyssey*.<sup>1</sup> J. D. O'Hara, in fact, closes off any possibility of uniting the scattered Homeric references that have already been noted: he cautions us that detecting an occasional Nausicaa does not "allow us to generalize *Molloy* into another *Odyssey* or *Ulysses*." Although the "serio-comic juxtaposition" of Joyce's *Ulysses* does, he says, also characterize Beckett, Joyce's "extended Homeric parallel has no equivalent in Beckett's works."<sup>2</sup> I would like to argue that *Molloy* does provide just such an extended parallel. Though Beckett certainly deflates the epic style, he is not only reducing heroic pretensions to absurdity. Instead, he deepens many of the implications already present in Odysseus's shifting identities.

Structurally, both *The Odyssey* and *Molloy* fall into two parts. The epic spends a long time on Telemachus's search for his father before introducing Odysseus's effort to get home. *Molloy* also breaks into two quests, Molloy's for his mother and Moran's for Molloy. Both works emphasize parents and children. While Odysseus searches mainly for Penelope, he also has important recognition scenes with his son and his father. Molloy, whose principal goal is his mother, wonders vaguely if he might have a son somewhere.<sup>3</sup> Moran also fantasizes that "my son, his anger spent, would have pity on me and come back to me! Or that Molloy, whose country this was, would come to me, who had not been able to go to him, and grow to be a friend, and like a father to me, and help me to do what I had to do, so that Youdi would not be angry with me" (pp. 161-162). A possible fatherly connection of Molloy to Moran blurs much more than that of Odysseus to Telemachus. Yet even Telemachus, who knows his family, expresses doubts: "My mother certainly says I am Odysseus' son; but for myself I cannot tell. It's a wise child that knows its own father."<sup>4</sup> And Odysseus's father, Laertes, when confronted at last by a disguised son who has such difficulty revealing both feelings and identity, is forced to refer to "my unhappy son—if ever I had one" (*O*; p. 358). Laertes's grieving skepticism thus sounds much like Molloy's more sardonic doubts about a son (p. 7).

The main difference, of course, between Homer's and Beckett's quests is that Odysseus does arrive at Penelope's bed, and he does meet Telemachus and Laertes. Molloy, on the other hand, manages to reach his mother's *bed* without having settled things with *her*, while Moran misses Molloy altogether. Yet Odysseus's recognitions

---

<sup>1</sup>See John Fletcher, "Interpreting *Molloy*," in *Samuel Beckett Now*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 161; Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 83; and Dieter Wellershoff, "Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett's Novels," in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 96-97.

<sup>2</sup>"Introduction," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy*, Malone Dies, *The Unnamable*, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 20, 23.

<sup>3</sup>*Three Novels by Samuel Beckett*, tr. Patrick Bowles in collaboration with the author (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 7. Further page numbers will be noted in parentheses.

<sup>4</sup>Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1946), p. 30. Further page numbers will be noted in parentheses with the letter *O*.

are not perfect. Though he can go so far as to find his dead mother in the underworld, he cannot touch her and doubts if this is "a mere phantom that grim Persephone has sent me to accentuate my grief" (*O*; p. 177). Beckett magnifies this aspect of Odysseus's experience, so that all human contact in *Molloy* occurs between illusory, ungraspable phantoms.

In *The Odyssey* a council of gods activates the quests, sending out Hermes to Calypso and Odysseus, and Athene to Telemachus. A mysterious bureaucracy also instigates Moran's search and requires his report, as a messenger comes for Molloy's pages. While critics usually connect Youdi and Gaber with a Judeo-Christian tradition, these misty figures may also double as Greek parodies.<sup>5</sup>

The "reports" of the Greek rhapsodes begin in medias res, with a little help from the muse. Molloy has a "muse," he says, but it talks mainly about "this lewd orifice" (p. 79). Molloy makes a point that his thirsty messenger "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?" (p. 8). Actually he begins in his mother's bed, which must come chronologically after the edge of the forest—that is, in the middle of the book and in the traditional middle of things. Still, at the outset "it's nearly the end" (p. 8), since all Beckett's characters are conscious in life of being close to death.

Besides these parallels in double quests and in orders from afar to set out or to "sing," every one of Odysseus's main adventures has its echo in Molloy's wanderings. The centerpiece of Odysseus's adventures is his descent to the underworld. The Greek hero goes to the "River of Ocean and the frontiers of the world, where the fog-bound Cimmerians live in the City of Perpetual Mist" (*O*; p. 171). There Odysseus digs a trench, into which he pours the blood of slaughtered sheep. He promises to sacrifice, in addition, his finest jet-black sheep, if he ever gets home. Odysseus can speak across the trench to a number of spirits of the dead, including the prophet Teiresias, who comes up with a gold rod in his hand. Teiresias informs Odysseus about the rest of his adventures and gives him warnings (some of them later ignored, to Odysseus's detriment).

Molloy also makes his descent to an "underworld." After passing a canal, on the frontiers of town, he comes not to a trench but to a ditch, and instead of conversing from the side, he is characteristically sprawled in it (pp. 26-29). The City of Mist has become a mist inside his head, "which rises in me every day and veils the world from me and veils me from myself" (p. 29). Molloy wakes in the ditch to see a shepherd and his dog. There is again a question of slaughtering sheep, and Molloy wonders if the dog thinks that he, Molloy, is a "black sheep entangled in the brambles" (p. 28). Whether it is Odysseus's black sheep or the biblical ram "caught in a thicket by his horns" and substituted for Isaac, Molloy himself has become the victim.

Beckett translates the pathos of Odysseus's reunion with the dead into Molloy's anguish about the sheep, "among which there were lambs, and often wondering if they had reached some commonage or fallen, their skulls shattered, their thin legs crumpling, first to their knees, then over on their fleecy sides, under the pole-axe, though that is not the way they slaughter sheep, but with a knife, so that they bleed to death" (p. 29). Molloy asks the shepherd, who has a crook, like Teiresias's rod, where he is taking the sheep, to the fields or to the shambles. "But whether it was he didn't understand, or didn't want to reply, he didn't reply, but went on his way . . ." (p. 29). Naturally, there will be no prophecy to Molloy, either about where he presently is, or

---

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, John Fletcher's suggestion that Youdi and Gaber echo Yahweh and Gabriel, in *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 148.

about where he or the sheep might go in the future; when there is a prophet, he is mute.

Odysseus in the underworld also speaks to Achilles, who asserts that he would “rather be a serf in the house of some landless man . . . than king of all these dead men” (*O*; p. 184). Molloy echoes Achilles’s sentiment, but with sardonic twists: “And I for my part have always preferred slavery to death, I mean being put to death . . . Yes, the confusion of my ideas on the subject of death was such that I sometimes wondered, believe me or not, if it wasn’t a state of being even worse than life” (p. 68).

Beckett’s dog guarding the sheep resembles Cerberus guarding the entrance to Hades, just as the old man on the barge at the canal resembles Charon, ferrying the dead. Though Cerberus and Charon do not appear at the time of Odysseus’s consultation with Teiresias, these Greek guardians of Tartarus, along with Beckett’s more Christianly hellish sulphur and phosphorus burning on the horizon beyond the ferryman (p. 27), reinforce the interpretation of Molloy with the shepherd as a version of Odysseus on the edge of the underworld. Molloy, of course, does not just make a brief visit to hell but seems to inhabit a land of the living dead permanently.

Fletcher has already pointed out a connection between Lousse and Circe (through the word “moly”), and between Ruth or Edith and Calypso.<sup>9</sup> I would underline the irony that this time Lousse administers the “miserable mols” (p. 54), whereas Hermes gives Odysseus a plant called moly as an antidote against Circe’s drugs. Lousse herself and Molloy too, whose name sounds like the plant’s, are their own “proof against enchantment.” Circe has fawning wolves; Lousse has a dog. And Molloy, like Odysseus, stays with his Circe about a year, or what could be interpreted as a year (p. 51). But while Odysseus is expected to return to Ithaca between the waning and the waxing of the moon (*O*; p. 219), like some temporarily eclipsed nature god, Molloy at Lousse’s elaborately explains that he cannot tell the phases of the moon and can barely locate it, except to say that it is sailing inexorably out of the picture (pp. 39-41).

Molloy has the same number of “other women” in his life as Odysseus, besides the woman (Penelope or mother) toward whom he is traveling. Ruth or Edith or Rose is, like Calypso, the one with whom Molloy claims his most serious relation. But Calypso’s garden (*O*; p. 89) is transferred to Lousse’s, and her cave appears only at the seaside, where Molloy also meets up with a Nausicaa urged on by giggling companions (p. 75). Molloy leaves the cave, moreover, for the same reason Odysseus leaves Calypso. Odysseus prefers the hardship of travelling home to the sameness of immortality with Calypso, and Molloy too finds that “unfortunately there are other needs than that of rotting in peace, it’s not the word, I mean of course my mother” (p. 76).

Just as Odysseus in his wanderings alternates between peaceable lures and hostile forces, equally hindering his return, Molloy encounters lulls as well as obstacles. He periodically forgets his mother, and, recalling the Lotus-eaters, eats some grass at Lousse’s, on a page where he also mentions opiates (p. 27). While Odysseus copes with the lure of the Sirens by having himself lashed to the mast, Molloy is restrained from stopping for music by the policeman: “I seemed to hear, at a certain moment, a distant music. I stopped, the better to listen. Go on, he said. Listen, I said. Get on, he said. I wasn’t allowed to listen to the music” (p. 21). The hostile policeman also resembles the Cyclops, as Fletcher points out, though he does not specify that even the mystery over Molloy’s name in the police interrogation

---

<sup>9</sup>Fletcher, “Interpreting *Molloy*,” p. 161. There is also a Greek nymph Leuce, coveted unsuccessfully by Hades. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), I, 121.

parodies Odysseus's use of the "noman" riddle. Odysseus does finally give his name to the giant, gratuitously, and he is reproached for doing so by his companions, because he leaves himself open to a curse. Molloy eventually lights on his elusive name and shouts it out, though "nothing compelled me to give this information" (p. 23).

Odysseus's other adventures appear in greatly attenuated form. His bag of winds from Aeolus deteriorates into Molloy's discussion of his farts per hour (p. 30). Odysseus leaves Calypso to go toward the Isle of the Sun, and Molloy moves on from Lousse's "towards the sun, why not, the wind having fallen. Or rather towards the least gloomy quarter of the heavens" (p. 62). Far from breaking a taboo by eating the cattle of the sun-god, Molloy is more likely not to be able even to find his food (at Lousse's). The Scylla and Charybdis dilemma which follows the sojourn with Circe might reside in Molloy's choice between two "chapels" or recesses in a blind alley (p. 61), or maybe in the "choice" as to which leg was really worse (pp. 77-78).

After leaving the Phaeacian festivities where he recounts his adventures, Odysseus wakes up on an unknown shore with the Phaeacians's gifts, whose value he details with great satisfaction. Molloy's closest approach to Phaeacian games is his huge effort to pick up a child's marble, followed by the urchin's "Thanks I suppose" (p. 49). Molloy comes away from Lousse's with silver loot, which he describes in detail despite the fact that he does not know what it is (p. 63). The irony that Odysseus, when put ashore by the Phaeacians, cannot recognize his own island and town is magnified in *Molloy*, since this latter-day befuddled adventurer "wandered about the town in search of a familiar monument, so that I might say, I am in my town, after all, I have been there all the time" (pp. 60, 91). He, unlike Odysseus, never does find out where he is.

Odysseus's nurse Eurycleia recognizes him by a scar on his thigh, thought by scholars to recall Adonis's thigh wound from a boar and perhaps to recall the emasculation suffered by some dying and resurrected gods.<sup>7</sup> Molloy has no thigh wound but he does have distinctive testicles, which he threatens to destroy, since they "bore false witness" against him (p. 35). "But these cullions, I must be attached to them after all, cherish them as others do their scars, or the family album" (p. 36). On the same page we hear about the burial of Lousse's dog, which has only to meet up with Molloy to be killed by him, just as Odysseus's old dog Argus dies as soon as Odysseus returns home.

Odysseus's stay in Eumaeus's hut is shadowed by Molloy's encounter with the charcoal burner, "begging me to share his hut, believe it or not" (p. 84). Odysseus's tale then draws to a close with the fight against the suitors, and Molloy likewise climaxes his traipsings with a fight against the charcoal burner, a suitor for Molloy's affection ("dirty old brute") (p. 84). Even in *The Odyssey*, where the battle is just and expected, the ferocity of Odysseus's revenge, particularly against the women, comes as a shock to the modern reader; Molloy's viciousness shocks us more because it is ironically turned against a helpless victim who is the only man in the book to show him any welcome. As Odysseus in his weakness as beggar has to bide his time before striking, Molloy too, swinging on his crutches, has to find the optimum moment: "I swung, that's all that matters, in an ever-widening arc, until I decided the moment had come and launched myself forward with all my strength and consequently, a moment later, backward, which gave the desired result. Where did I get this access of vigour? From my weakness perhaps. The shock knocked me down. Naturally. I came

---

<sup>7</sup>See Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 176.

a cropper. You can't have everything, I've often noticed it" (p. 84). Whereas Odysseus triumphs, Molloy falls down with his enemy.

In some ways, then, Molloy represents the reversal or impossibility of a modern Odysseus. Molloy says explicitly that he is a Ulysses, a "sadly rejoicing [Joycing?] slave," crawling along the deck, "which, as it bears me from no fatherland away, bears me onward to no shipwreck" (p. 51). "For if I see myself putting to sea, and the long hours without landfall, I do not see the return, the tossing on the breakers, and I do not hear the frail keel grating on the shore" (p. 69). Still emphasizing his difference from Odysseus, he even goes so far as to say, "The Aegean, thirsting for heat and light, him I killed, he killed himself, early on, in me. The pale gloom of rainy days was better suited to my taste, no, that's not it, to my humour, no, that's not it either, I had neither taste nor humour, I lost them early on. Perhaps what I mean is that the pale gloom, etc., hid me better, without its being on that account particularly pleasing to me. Chameleon in spite of himself, there you have Molloy, viewed from a certain angle" (p. 30).

But if Molloy reverses Odysseus, in other ways he continues possibilities already latent in the Greek. Just as he is announcing that he killed the Aegean in himself, who can only be Odysseus, Molloy underscores the continuing parallel, since Odysseus too was a chameleon. The man with the oar on his shoulder becomes the man with a crutch; Odysseus had already compared himself to the lame Hephaestus, among jeering crowds (*O*; p. 129, *M*, p. 35). Odysseus is "ingenious," and Molloy too has that epithet, "being ingenious," since he can push his bicycle and manage his crutches (p. 20). Odysseus loves his "lying yarns" and gives out false stories of identity, as Molloy decides, "What I need now is stories, it took me a long time to know that, and I'm not sure of it" (p. 13). Odysseus, with all his stories and pseudonyms, in the end actually finds it hard to divest himself of his masks. When he is still "testing" Laertes, after all need to do so has passed, we see that his mask has nearly frozen to his face. In fact, this suspicion of fluid and elusive identity in the epic is the most important legacy from *The Odyssey* to appear in *Molloy*.

The Homeric bard asks his muse to "sing the man," which is supposed to mean literally "track down" or "search out" a man of "many turnings."<sup>8</sup> Beckett could have known this literal meaning, since he spent time helping Joyce with his Greek.<sup>9</sup> The idea of "searching out" a shifting self recurs in *Molloy*: "Yes it sometimes happens and will sometimes happen again that I forget who I am and strut before my eyes, like a stranger" (p. 42). Even the various voices in the trilogy, Molloy, Moran, Malone, the Unnamable, who seem to merge into each other as one another's creations, recall Odysseus's pseudonyms, which become so real to him that he cannot tell them from himself.

The biggest difference between Odysseus and Molloy is that Odysseus finally emerges from his infirmity and beggarliness for a restoration to his kingdom. Molloy, on the other hand, knows only the down side of the cycle. We are left, nevertheless, with some vague hope when the mysterious gong and voice sound from beyond the ditch (p. 91). Since a gong (for dinner) sounds at Moran's too (p. 115), it is tempting to expect that this "father-son" pair may eventually synchronize their sounds and meet up. They don't. The "consolation" of the gong resides not in any successful communication, but at least in an orientation toward another. The gong, by the way, if it has any resemblance to bells, may commemorate the brief conjunction of Bloom

---

<sup>8</sup>Douglas J. Stewart, *The Disguised Guest: Rank, Role, and Identity in the Odyssey* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 185.

<sup>9</sup>See Barbara Reich Gluck, *Beckett and Joyce* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 33.

and Stephen in *Ulysses*: "What sound accompanied the union of their tangent, the disunion of their (respectively) centrifugal and centripetal hands? The sound of the peal of the hour of the night by the chime of the bells in the church of Saint George."<sup>10</sup>

Although Odysseus tears off his pseudonym at last to discover a self, the fact that he must march off from Penelope almost on the morrow of his arrival home makes this self temporary and puts him already in the direction of the twentieth century, when Molloy is bent on leaving his town as soon as he has arrived (p. 65). Moran, too, has a premonition that after his "vagrancy" he may once more be banished from home to "begin again" (p. 132). Odysseus's quest, in fact, begins again and again in his long tradition, which includes both *Ulysses* and *Molloy*. When Molloy repeats, "This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time" (pp. 8, 75), he may forecast the three books of Beckett's trilogy.<sup>11</sup> He perhaps also lines up the threesome of *Odyssey*, *Ulysses*, and *Molloy*. *Molloy*, like the last of Michelangelo's pietàs, is the most stark of the series. The three "times" of Molloy's writing, intoned so ritually, also recall the three libations traditionally poured out to "saving" Zeus. For Beckett, neither Zeus nor Youdi nor one's father nor one's son can be saving. Yet the wine or the seed or the words poured fruitlessly on the ground are still defiantly a celebration, an odyssey, a crawling on.

---

<sup>10</sup>James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Modern Library, 1961), p. 704.

<sup>11</sup>H. Porter Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 111.