

Redemption, Order, and the Undoing of Plot in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*

Peter Eubanks
University of Iowa

In Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), the parallels between Moran's paradisiacal garden and the Garden of Eden are striking. For example, Moran describes his restful existence immediately preceding Gaber's disruptive entrance with religious imagery: "It was a Sunday in summer. I was sitting in my little garden, in a wicker chair, a black book closed on my knees. It must have been about eleven o'clock, still too early to go to church. . . . All was still. Not a breath" (92). The fact that his story begins on a Sunday not only implies the calm and tranquillity that Moran experiences on this day of rest but also suggests completion or perfection in the Latin sense of *perfectus*, meaning complete or done, for Sunday throughout the Christian world represents the seventh day when the creation was finally complete and God rested from His labors. Also, seven (*shevah* from the Hebrew root *savah*, meaning to be full or satisfied, have enough of) signifies the Hebrew number of spiritual perfection or completion (Bullinger 158). "Sunday" thus represents not only the restful state of Moran on a Sabbath morning, but more importantly a certain notion of completion, being finished, or wholeness.

The fact that this Sunday takes place in summer is likewise of note,

for the summer season itself suggests another completion of the seasonal cycle, a cycle that reaches its zenith in summer, gradually slips into hibernation in fall and winter, and then slowly reburgeons in spring until it attains its full height in summer again. Even the black book on Moran's knees seems to indicate this sense of completion, for its "closed" position suggests that Moran has just finished reading from it. The idea of completion or perfection that Beckett evokes adds to the tranquillity that pervades the opening scene of Moran's account. It serves as a parallel between Adam, who lives in the completed Garden of Eden, and Moran, who finds himself at the beginning of his retrospective account living also in a certain state of completion in his own garden on a tranquil Sunday.

Completion or wholeness also implies a sense of order; indeed, for Moran everything is in its proper place, performing its proper function: "From my neighbours' chimneys the smoke rose straight and blue. None but tranquil sounds, the clicking of mallet and ball, a rake on pebbles, a distant lawn-mower, the bell of my beloved church. And birds of course, blackbird and thrush" (93). All fit neatly into a certain structure to which Moran himself subscribes, attested by his monochronic penchant for punctuality, for example, which helps him to maintain this sense of order: "I shall sit down at four o'clock, I said. I did not need to add sharp. I liked punctuality, all those whom my roof sheltered had to like it too" (98). That Moran hates to be disturbed or interrupted also adds to this sense of order; when Gaber pays Moran a visit unannounced, for example, he observes, "I was disposed to receive him frostily enough, all the more so as he had the impertinence to come straight to where I was sitting, under my Beauty of Bath. With people who took this liberty I had no patience. If they wished to speak to me they had only to ring at the door of my house" (93). Moran further illustrates his desire for uninterrupted order when Father Ambrose cuts him off in midsentence: "I dislike being interrupted. I sulked" (100). To Moran, any disturbances or interruptions, including disruptions of his regimented schedule, signify an affront to the order that he is trying to maintain, and thus such disturbances are unwelcome. Disorder, or any type of disorganization,

represents to Moran a form of imperfection, the unraveling of a structure needed to maintain completeness and wholeness.

Further parallels between Adam and Moran develop when Moran, after leaving his garden, laments that he may never be able to regain his lost paradise, recalling Proust's famous observation that true paradises are lost paradises:

Does this mean I shall one day be banished from my house, from my garden, lose my trees, my lawns, my birds of which the least is known to me and the way all its own it has of singing, of flying, of coming up to me or fleeing at my coming, lose and be banished from the absurd comforts of my home where all is snug and neat and all those things at hand without which I could not bear being a man, where my enemies cannot reach me, which it was my life's work to build, to adorn, to perfect, to keep? (132)

Here, Moran, whose "life's work" is to care for his home and garden, recalls God's injunction to Adam: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Furthermore, Moran appears to have a certain "dominion" over "the fowl of the air," just as Adam is commanded to have (Gen. 1:26). In fact, Moran's statement about his birds, particularly his phrase, "of which the least is known to me," brings to mind Christ's observation in the Sermon on the Mount when he reminds his followers that God, who is Lord of all, cares and provides even for the birds of the air: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them" (Matt. 6:26). Thus, by mentioning his care and concern for his very own "fowls of the air," Moran establishes his lordship over his own home and garden, reflecting both the divine lordship of God and the dominion that Adam commands not just over the fowls of the air but also over all other aspects of the garden of Eden. Moran's concern that one day he may be "banished from my house," furthermore, parallels Adam's banishment from the Garden of Eden.

However, as Philip H. Solomon points out, "In the world of [Beck-

ett's] trilogy, man's supposed dominion over the animals seems a vain notion" (142). Indeed, Moran's lordship over the animals in his garden—over his home and garden in general—ends the moment he leaves them behind. When he comes back home, he returns to a paradise lost, with no discernible trace of dominion left. His bees and hens are dead; and the birds, once a symbol of his dominion over his little property, are no longer recognizable to him in the same way as before: "My birds had not been killed. They were wild birds. And yet quite trusting. I recognized them and they seemed to recognize me. *But one never knows*. Some were missing and some were new. *I tried to understand their language better*" (175, emphasis added). Here, Moran no longer exhibits quite the same degree of familiarity with his birds he had shown earlier. The fact that in the beginning he specifically mentions that his birds belong to the "blackbird and thrush" species, for example, seems to demonstrate a certain dominion and familiarity that the simpler "[t]hey were wild birds" does not denote. This incipient uncertainty thus represents a change in Moran's situation and identity, underlined also by the change in narrative voice from first to third person in the concluding paragraph of his account: "I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one" (175-76).

The altered state of affairs in which Moran finds himself at the end of his account indeed points to a kind of fall, a certain loss of paradise that Moran experiences, which appears all the more striking when one considers that Moran's leaving his garden represents a loss of his seated position. Because the ability to sit can be linked etymologically to the notion of possession (Latin *posse*, to possess, + *sedere*, to sit), Moran's altered position parallels the dominion that he has also lost over his property, which in turn ultimately points to the irretrievable loss of his previously ordered paradisiacal state. As Thomas Trezise points out, "Most remarkable indeed in this paradisiacal scene, aside from the iconographic 'black book,' is the sitting position, which Moran will be the last of Beckett's characters to assume and which incorporates the very *assise*, the foundation or *Setzung* of the self at

home with itself" (45). Thus, Moran's loss of the sitting position not only suggests the fallen and essentially horizontal physical position of Moran, who can no longer get along without crutches or his umbrella, but also implies a self that is not at home with itself, a self that has lost its *Setzung* and cannot, in fact, go home again.¹

Moran's loss of the sitting position thus points to his loss of home, the peaceful, even prelapsarian existence he leads before the fall introduced by Gaber's interruption and his own subsequent departure from his garden paradise. This loss or fall naturally emphasizes a need for redemption. Indeed, reconciliation with God, which is at the heart of Judeo-Christian redemption or salvation, implies a sitting down again with the Almighty (Latin *re-con-silio*), a return to a state of paradise or purity, as many references in the Bible to the sitting position as a sign of ultimate redemption clearly indicate. (See, for example, Psalms 110:1, Matt. 8:11, Mark 10:37, Luke 22:30, Eph. 2:6, and Rev. 3:21, among many passages.) In this context the Jewish yearly rite of atonement, which included the *teshuvah*, a return to God, also implies a reconciliatory *yeshivah*, that is, a sitting down or taking rest in the kingdom of heaven (Jastrow 600; Nibley 562). Moran's inability to sit down suggests his utter inability to obtain a restoration of the paradisiacal *habitus* he enjoys initially, the broadening chasm that increasingly separates his current, unredeemed state of being from his *status quo ante*.

Moran's fall—meaning his deteriorating state, his inability to recuperate the paradise that he has lost, and his inability to regain a sense of order—is also signified through his writing style, which becomes more and more unstructured, manifested in paragraphs of increasing length and structural incoherence, signifying his gradual tendency toward

¹Also significant etymologically is the Latin *habitus*, past participle of *habere*, meaning to have or possess, from which the English *habitation* derives. Moran concomitantly loses his paradise, that is, his habitation, and his possession of the various elements therein. The loss of his lordship and dominion over his own home and garden points to his ultimate loss of self, as Trezise remarks: "Indeed, Moran's retrospective self-portrait presents an entirely convincing prototype of the *petit propriétaire*, for whom to have and to

mental and physical deterioration and entropy. Indeed, the second part of Molloy's account consists simply of two long paragraphs, a tendency toward which the first part has gradually steered. As Gönül Pultar observes,

The indentation, or the evident lack of it, is another fabrication that serves as a device. It plays an important part in the storytelling, in the unfolding of the plot. It acts out before us, so to speak, *Molloy's* protagonist's progression—call it descent or regression—towards decrepitude and alienation. . . . [I]ndentation is used in *Molloy* to bring to light the process of regression from 'erect' bourgeois to bed-ridden moribund. (22)

Thus, the neat sense of order that pervades the early portion of Moran's retrospective narrative soon dissipates as he gradually falls into disarray and destitution.

As mentioned, Moran's fall, like Adam's, brings with it a need for redemption. Indeed, Moran's entire impulse to write stems from his need for expiation, for atonement: "Recalling another recluse, Marcel Proust, [Moran seeks] self-knowledge and, with it, salvation through [his] writing" (Solomon 52). While it is true that Moran in fact writes his report at the behest of his mysterious boss, Youdi, and not purely for his own purposes, the manner in which he writes his report reveals the narrator's intentionality and the more salvific purpose of his writing: "But I shall conduct it my own way, up to a point. And if it has not the good fortune to give satisfaction, to my employer, if there are passages that give offence to him and to his colleagues, then so much the worse for us all, for them all, for there is no worse for me" (131). Moran includes details in his report that bear no relevance for his boss and that transgress the professional boundaries of his assignment: "For it is one of the features of this penance that I may not pass over what is over and straightway come to the heart of the matter" (133). His primary purpose is to receive absolution and to restore, through writing, the order he once enjoyed; he speaks here of a thoroughness that is necessary for him to receive complete cleansing. As Pultar observes, "Writing this report is a

'penance' for Moran. It is a penance because, at one level, it is drudgery, it is a 'tedious' job. . . . Thus, the deliberate, over-meticulous recording of trivia turns out to be conscious, painstaking registering of minutiae" (15-16). While many of the minute details of Moran's account may appear banal, he nevertheless finds their inclusion in his tale necessary in order to make his penance complete. His redemptive writing represents a response to a "voice" that he hears, which urges him to write his report in the unusual way in which he does:

And the voice I listen to needs no Gaber to make it heard. For it is within me and exhorts me to continue to the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine, and patiently fulfill in all its bitterness my calamitous part, as it was my will, when I had a will, that others should. (131-32)

Thus, Moran's account may be linked to the tradition of confessional novels and particularly to their origin in the Puritan/Protestant diary tradition with which Beckett, an Anglo-Irish Protestant, no doubt was familiar: "The diary had a special place in a Puritan's life. While the Catholic went to church and confessed to the priest, the Puritan wrote down his sins in his journal. For a Protestant, keeping a diary was a display of devotion almost equal to praying to God" (Pultar 97).² As Ian Watt points out, this "internalization of conscience," while stressed by Calvin, ultimately stems from the literary tradition launched by St. Augustine's *Confessions* (74). The Protestant confessional diary serves also as an opportunity for the writer "to take an overview of his life, the way a businessman would consider his financial situation" (Pultar 98). Thus, Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), for example, keeps a regular journal. Also, Lorna Martens writes that "the Puritan formula of establishing an order in the sense of keeping a book has remained a standard motivation for diary keeping throughout the history of the genre" (67).

Precisely this need for "establishing an order" drives Moran to write his account and to write it in the particular manner in which he does.

As already noted, Moran experiences a sense of wholeness, of completion, in the moments before Gaber arrives with Moran's new assignment. Once Moran leaves his garden and sets out on his quest to find Molloy, he loses his "last moments of peace and happiness" and falls into disorder and incompleteness (93), in consequence of which he experiences a desire for redemption, for a restitution of the *status quo ante*. The act of writing thus represents for Moran at once a penance designed to redeem his fall and an attempt (though vain) to restore the state of order and completion that he had known before Gaber's intrusion. Such a restoration, for Moran, necessitates a thorough, complete, and whole confession/penance, just as the state to which he wishes to be restored is whole and complete. One may thus read his desire to give a thorough account, replete with the minute details of his experiences, as an attempt in some sense to reattain or, more precisely, to relive the paradisiacal state of completeness and order that he inhabits before he sets out on his quest. By painstakingly recording the most seemingly insignificant quotidian events, Moran tries (unsuccessfully) to create order in the disarray that has become his life.

Of course, Moran's desires for restitution and redemption are never realized. During the communion scene the priest "broke off, raising a finger, and his eyes, to the ceiling. Heavens, he said, what is that stain? I looked in turn at the ceiling. Damp, I said" (100). That the priest should notice a stain during the very moment when Moran seeks absolution by taking communion demonstrates the essential futility of Moran's redemptive quest. Having left his garden, Moran feels an ineffaceable stain upon himself that he tries unsuccessfully to extinguish throughout his account, and the priest's belated communion offers no relief: "And as I made my way home I felt like one who, having swallowed a pain-killer, is first astonished, then indignant, on obtaining no relief" (102). The communion's inefficacy even causes Moran to question whether the host indeed has been properly consecrated: "And I was almost ready to suspect Father Ambrose, alive to my excesses of the forenoon, of having fobbed me off with unconsecrated bread. Or of mental reservation as he pronounced the magic words" (102).

Moran carries the burden of this unabsolved stain with him throughout his account, trying constantly to eradicate it through confessional writing, yet never successful in achieving any real sense of restitution. Julia Kristeva's comment in reference to Proust's *œuvre* seems relevant here: "Writing does not eradicate vice, but it does absolve it. To the realism that it propels, the novel adds a metaphysical paradigm in which vice is at once approved and condemned. Ultimately, vice is displayed in order to be removed" (158). For Moran, however, vice is displayed precisely in order to demonstrate that it cannot be removed, that it can find no absolution. Like Proust, Moran writes for redemptive purposes, but he is not successful in finding any redemption through writing. For Moran writing thus becomes a futile exercise in self-consolation as he struggles to regain the sense of paradisiacal completeness and order that he has lost. Hence, Moran cannot stop writing, a fact that he suggests at the very outset of his account—"My report will be long. Perhaps I shall not finish it" (92)—for he never finds absolution, and thus he never stops writing in pursuit of it. The Unnamable's last words in the trilogy which completes Moran's account, "I'll go on" (*Unnamable* 414), point to the inability of the trilogy's protagonist to cease writing as long as there is, in his opinion, redemption to be had (*Pultar* 122). As Martens indicates, giving up confessional or diary writing is a sign of cure; thus, the protagonist's inability to cease writing illustrates his yet unredeemed state (123). Hence, while the protagonist's physical and mental condition continues to atrophy asymptotically (ever disintegrating though never resulting in actual death), his need for redemption and restoration of order drives him to continue writing *ad infinitum*, even when there is nothing left of him but a voice.

As a novel, then, *Molloy* essentially signifies, as Ruby Cohn points out, a "writer's writing about writing becoming a writing" (120). The significant role of penance, which drives Moran's impulse to write, makes the act of writing itself central to the novel's plot, a conclusion with which Dina Sherzer concurs:

Instead of considering [the books of the trilogy] simply as an

ensemble of recounted events, one must conceive of them as texts where the act of writing *also* constitutes an action. It is, moreover, the novels themselves which invite such a reading, for they begin with a *cadre* in which a narrator presents himself as being in the process of writing. (15, translation mine)

The plot lines of the retrospective accounts in *Molloy* are incidental to the greater plot of the novel as a whole. As Pultar writes, “It becomes evident that the subject of the novel—as distinct from the subject of the retrospective tale—is the process of writing” (6).

As the true subject of the novel, the writing of *Molloy* itself seems to parallel the events of the novel’s retrospective tale. For example, just as the protagonist’s sense of order unravels and he deteriorates gradually towards states of increasing decrepitude, so, too, does the written text of *Molloy* unravel or undo previously held assumptions about the structure and plot of the novel. In reading *Molloy*, indeed in reading Beckett’s entire trilogy, readers rather resemble the protagonist in that they lose a certain sense of order that they never regain as they are forced to relinquish previous assumptions. Former notions of plot and structure are lost, spiraling rapidly out of control and disintegrating asymptotically until readers are left with nothing but a ranting, incoherent voice with no semblance of traditional characterization nor plot structure. Like the detective Moran who seeks Molloy, readers, too, play detective as they search in vain for a restoration of familiar plot structure.

The order that Moran loses when he leaves his garden, creating his need for redemption and ultimately impelling him to write, thus points to the very act of writing *Molloy* itself, which undoes assumptions about the novel and its constitution. Readers thus experience an undoing or unraveling of order and receive the impulse to continue reading, perhaps from a desire to see the restoration of this lost order in the text, a desire that will ironically remain unfulfilled. Like Moran, readers, setting out on an impossible quest to see order restored where it has been irrevocably lost, are driven by a need for redemption and consequently seek to regain certain comfortable boundaries as they existed before they had been transgressed. For readers, a restoration of traditional notions of plot structure, charac-

terization, and form will never come when reading *Molloy*; the plot continues to disintegrate as assumptions about structure and form become undone, following closely the general deterioration of the novel's protagonist. *Molloy* treats not only the disintegration of a character but also the utter deterioration of readers' previous assumptions about the novel itself.

WORKS CITED

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Gary Willis. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Molloy*. 1951. *Three Novels*. New York: Grove P, 1965. 1-176.
- . *The Unnamable*. 1953. *Three Novels*. New York: Grove P, 1965. 291-414.
- Bullinger, E. W. *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1980.
- Cohn, Ruby. *Back to Beckett*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Jastrow, Marcus. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. 2 Vols. New York: Pardes, 1950. Vol. 1.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Time and Sense*. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Martens, Lorna. *The Diary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- Nibley, Hugh. *Approaching Zion*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989.
- Pultar, Gönül. *Technique and Tradition in Beckett's Trilogy of Novels*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1996.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *La Nausée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1938.
- Sherzer, Dina. *Structure de la Trilogie de Beckett*. The Hague: Mouton, 1976.
- Solomon, Philip H. *The Life after Birth: Imagery in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy*. University, MS: Romance Monographs, 1975.
- Treize, Thomas. *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. 1957. Berkeley: U of California P, 1965.