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"MISERY TO STAY, MISERY TO GO": (Dis)Covering Joyce's Shipwreck in Beckett's *Molloy*

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This essay performs a close reading of the Ulysses-passage from Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) from the double perspective of the Ulysses-story from canto 26 of Dante's *Inferno* (1317) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The argument is that Molloy's reverse journey on the black boat of Ulysses bears a strong self-reflexive dimension in which is at stake Beckett's artistic freedom in relation to Joyce.

"A Great Measure of Freedom"

The following passage from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) has often been recognized as possibly punning on James Joyce's name and the titles of his two most famous novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939):

> I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit. And from the poop, poring upon the wave, a sadly rejoicing slave, I follow with my eyes the proud and futile wake. Which, as it bears me from no fatherland away, bears me onward to no shipwreck.
>
> (50)

Still, in spite of this remarkable succession of potential references, the passage's relation to Joyce remains far from straightforward, never mind conclusive, and is even altogether refuted by some.[1] Beckett's letter to Erich Franzen of 17 February 1954 further cultivates this ambivalence, as it offers a rather atypically precise explanation of the passage in question but (perhaps tellingly) omits any mention of Joyce:

> This passage is suggested (a) by a passage in the *Ethics* of Geulincx where he compares human freedom to that of a man, on board a boat carrying him irresistibly westward, free to move eastward within the limits of the boat itself, as far as the stern; and (b) by Ulysses' relation in Dante (Inf. 26) of his second voyage (a mediaeval tradition) to and beyond the Pillars of Hercules, his shipwreck and death.
>
> (2011, 458)

The first to have made critical use of this letter is Anthony Uhlmann. He believes that the juxtaposition of Dantesque and Geulingian nautical imagery expresses a sense of existential freedom in which "one is not only free in the most marginal of senses, but one is not even free to escape certain doom, one is not even free to defend oneself from inevitable destruction" (78). Though certainly important, Uhlmann's argument should not be considered exhaustive; as will be examined throughout this essay, the supposed expression of existential freedom through references to Dante and Geulincx may also function as another trope, as another obscure layer simultaneously covering up and exposing the passage's intertextual relations to Joyce's black boat of *Ulysses* and his proud and futile *Wake*.

"The Pioneering Spirit"

On their journey through the nine circles of Hell, each designated to the imprisonment and punishment of a specific type of sinner, Dante and Virgil encounter Ulysses in the eighth circle or *Malebolge*, which in turn is further divided into ten *bolge* (trenches). It is then from the sea of flames in the eighth *bolgia* containing all kinds of fraudsters that Ulysses emerges in the form of a "flame with its tip split in two" (26.52):

When I
set sail from Circe, who, more than a year,
had kept me occupied close to Gaëta
(before Aeneas called it by that name),
not sweetness of a son, not reverence
for an aging father, not the debt of love
I owed to Penelope to make her happy,
could quench deep in myself the burning wish
to know the world and have experience
of all man's vices, of all human worth […].

(26.90-99)

In short, the Homeric success story of Ulysses' homecoming is misleading because incomplete: once back home in Ithaca, Ulysses realized that there still remained some knowledge behind in the world and, once more, decided to leave behind wife and son: "So I set out on the deep and open sea" (26.100). As such, the Dantesque supplement rejects Ithaca not only as the spatial end point of Ulysses' travels but also, and more importantly, its very significance as a place of unconditional homecoming.

The ambiguity surrounding the teleological trajectory is further explored by Joyce in *Ulysses*, and especially in its ninth chapter, "Scylla and Charybdis." Here, Stephen Dedalus and John Eglinton, among others, hope to progress towards a truthful analysis of the father-son relationship in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stephen believes this can be accomplished by dissolving the dialectical opposition between father and son: "He is a ghost, a shadow now, the wind by Elsinore's rocks or what you will, the sea's voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father" (162). But when Eglinton questions Stephen as to whether he really believes his theory, the latter replies with a 'prompt' "No" (175). Similarly, if Stephen's wanderings through Dublin are interpreted as constitutive of his own pursuit for consubstantiality with Leopold Bloom, it appears that the itinerary of this paternal quest parallels that of the pseudo-scholastic debate about *Hamlet*, which leads to nowhere in particular. At least in "Scylla and Charybdis," any profound confrontation between Stephen and Bloom remains out of the question: the two pass by each other at the entrance steps of the National Library but fail to acknowledge each other verbally. Of course, later on in the novel, they do strike up an understanding. But, again, Stephen strays from the teleological path when, having politely declined Bloom's offer to stay at his place, he wanders off homeless in the novel's penultimate chapter, ironically titled "Ithaca." Thus, following Dante's retelling of Ulysses' story, Joyce's *Ulysses*, too, displaces the idealistic image of the Homeric homecoming: "By what could such a situation be precluded? By decease (change of state), by departure (change of place)" (597). Synthesis, though at times suggested, remains hopelessly absent or beside the point: "We know nothing but that he lived and suffered. Not even so much. Others abide our question. A shadow hangs all over the rest" (159).

Onward to Shipwreck

Derrida reads Joyce's *Ulysses* as being governed by two different "yes-laughters" coming from its author: on the one hand, there is the "reactive, even negative laughter" of Joyce's "hypermnesic mastery," indiscriminately affirming and negating everything; on the other, there is also "a James Joyce who can be heard laughing at this omnipotence – and at this great trick [*tour*] played" (68). Affirming everything, Joyce's 'yes' affirms first and foremost itself: it says yes to itself and, as a result, divides from itself; it also affirms, in other words, its own incompleteness or failure – it also says yes to (Stephen's) no. Joyce's laughter, therefore, is a laughter that "laughs from knowing and at knowledge" (Derrida, 71) and, subsequently, "condemns and condemns itself, at times sadistically, sardonically" (69). Thus, if Ulysses was meant to gather the entire world in the form of univocal knowledge, to ascend Mount Purgatory and reach Paradise, he is instead condemned to the tearing fires of Hell, forced to undergo ironic

punishment – that is, suffer equivocity – by way of being confined to a split flame whose "tip was moving back and forth, / as if it were the tongue itself that spoke, / the flame took on voice" (26.85-87). Joyce, on the other hand, as we will see in more detail shortly, moves back and forth his tongue not to give sorrowful testimony but, on the contrary, to laugh straight in the face of failure as he wilfully manoeuvres his black boat of *Ulysses* towards catastrophe and plunges into a sea whose shattering waves collapse into one proud but futile *Wake*.

Dirk Van Hulle postulates that the Joycean text is "nothing but a phenomenal *Erscheinung* which merely creates the *impression* that there is something to be unveiled" (57). We already saw a prime example of this alleged departure from and return to nothingness in Stephen's dialectical detour in "Scylla and Charybdis," as well as in his paternal quest throughout *Ulysses*. But Van Hulle's assertion arguably also corresponds to the largely French reading of Hegel's unhappy consciousness, supposedly both the first and last stage of the dialectic. Bruce Baugh summarizes as follows:

> When Spirit discovers that the truth it had sought outside itself is in fact its entire historical development, comprehended, systematically as a series of conceptually related stages that both negate and complement each other, it accomplishes a 'return to itself' from the alienation it suffered when it sought its truth in an object outside itself. Spirit's odyssey towards truth is in truth a homecoming, a reconciliation with itself.
>
> (2)

The dialectical process may acquire felicitous qualities precisely because of its inherent failure: only if one embarks on a dialectical detour in the first place, only if one first hides oneself, can one later reveal oneself and "[go] back, weary of the creation he has piled up to hide him from himself, an old dog licking an old sore" (Joyce 1986, 162). The Joycean dialectic may have been constructed only to enable its deconstruction: "As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image" (159).

If Dante's *Inferno* is therefore to be read as a critique of Ulysses' teleological quest for knowledge, it should not be forgotten that Dante succeeds in completing his own teleological trajectory from Hell to Paradise. What Joyce's *Ulysses* then goes on to show is that failure should not be exempt from the artistic voyage; on the contrary, art must fail and fail deliberately so that the subsequent wreck is not considered accidental: "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (Joyce 1986, 156). Instead of aiming for Paradise and ending up in Hell unwillingly, Joyce's *Ulysses* heads for shipwreck straight from the start: "No later undoing will undo the first undoing" (161). Impending disaster is transformed into premeditated failure, and thus into no failure at all but into a portal of discovery, a passage way back to oneself: "And so it returns. Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home" (309). And with this brief exhortation, Joyce first directs Dedalus and company towards the destructive glare of the sun, only to laugh hysterically when they come crashing down into the sea afterwards: "Fabulous artificer, the hawklike man. You flew. Whereto? […] Seabedaddled, fallen, weltering" (173).

"The Image of Old Geulincx"

In "Three Dialogues" (1949), Beckett argues that painter Bram Van Velde is at odds with the "history of painting," which is "the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee, in a kind of tropism towards a light" (145). Van Velde's contribution to art is therefore somewhat analogous to Joyce's: both steered their 'vehicles of expression' towards shipwreck and, in so doing, asserted that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is [the artist's] world and the shrink from it desertion" (145). Prior sections have shown how the image of Ulysses evolved from the futile effort to overcome failure in Homer's *Odyssey* into the inevitable failure of Dante's *Inferno* and, finally, into Joyce's proud attempt to master failure for aesthetic purposes in *Ulysses*. This section, then, will examine Molloy's antics on Ulysses' boat in view of Beckett's new imperative for art. The incentive is that Molloy's turn

on the black boat might somehow correspond to Beckett's "art turning from [itself] in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road" (139).

The image of Arnold Geulincx conjured up by Molloy during his peculiar protest might provide some impartial answers here. In *Murphy* (1938), Beckett claims the "beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx" as particularly involving "the occasions of fiasco" via the Geulingian axiom "*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*' (112). Uhlmann notes how this ambiguous expression "has often been translated as 'Where one is worth nothing, one should want nothing'. The Latin, *valeo*, carries the meaning both of 'to be able to, to have force' and 'to be worth'" (163). David Tucker, in turn, points out how Beckett may have read this axiom as preaching a radical absence of desire and activity.[2] The image of old Geulincx serves, summarily put, as a counterbalance for Ulysses' insatiable pioneering spirit: "[Beckett's] progression to Geulincx […] is also a turning back […] a 'surrender' inwards rather than a questing journey out for it" (Tucker, 45).

In view of the above, the Dante-Geulincx juxtaposition foregrounds, among other things, the opposing forces between in- and outside (the text). Consider, for example, how Dante merely listens to Ulysses' story whereas Molloy finds himself right in the middle of the action, reporting straight from the poop rather than merely rehashing another's story and putting Dantesque theory into immediate practice: "I know that I grieved then, and now again / I grieve when I remember what I saw, / and more than ever I restrain my talent" (Dante 1995, 26.19-21). If Ulysses' talent is to journey out into the world, then Dante suggests – at least in retrospect – suppressing or at least controlling such talent. As for Molloy, he too is aware of the inescapable shipwreck at the end of the line, but resolves to trample in circles right from the start: "When a man in a forest thinks he is going forward in a straight line, in reality he is going in a circle, I did my best to go in a circle, hoping to go in a straight line" (Beckett 2009a, 86). No matter whether it concerns teleological movement from Hell to Paradise or dialectical advancement from thesis to synthesis, Molloy refrains from that wherein he has no power: "I doubtless did better, at least not worse, not to stir from my observation post" (10). This all, of course, to the great annoyance of the Ulyssean/dialectical law demanding perpetual progression: "It ended in my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency" (17).

"From the Poop, Poring upon the Wave"

Molloy's Geulingian outlook on Ulysses' story may perhaps also provide an inside view on literature in general, and on Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular. Such a metafictional perspective might, for one thing, "enable" Molloy "to know when that unreal journey began, the second last but one of a form fading among forms, and which I here declare without further ado to have begun in the second or third week of June" (Beckett 2009a, 13). Coincidentally or not, Joyce's black boat of *Ulysses* set sail on June 16, always falling in either the second or third full week of June, whereas it is also the 'second last' Joycean voyage if one bears in mind the proud and futile *Wake* trailing it.

In *Ulysses*, Stephen links the dialectic to the origin of thought via the maternal figure: "What useful discovery did Socrates learn from Xanthippe? –Dialectic, Stephen answered: and from his mother how to bring thoughts into the world" (156). Beckett is almost identical in his associations when recounting the aesthetic revelation at his mother's in 1945: "I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [of being] in control of one's material. […] I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (qtd. in Knowlson, 352). Apart from prompting him – not unlike Molloy with respect to Ulysses – to head in the direction diametrically opposed to Joyce's, this 'antithetical' revelation positions itself right at the core of Beckett's literary thought: "Molloy and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly" (qtd. in Knowlson, 352). It should then come as no surprise to find traces to Molloy's 'origins' scattered all over his narrative: finding himself in his "mother's room" (3), he too starts campaigning in favour of subtraction rather than addition: "you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank

and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery" (9-10).

Molloy seemingly extends here his Geulingian approach to include literature's vain attempt to have word and world coincide fully. Blanchot, for one, would back such a retreat inwards of literature, which, "by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents. This is its law and truth" (1999, 367). Literature simply cannot overcome its inherent "deceit and mystification," which, moreover, "are not only inevitable but constitute the writer's honesty" (368). The writer must accordingly write in such a way that language turns in on itself and signifies nothing (from the material world): "rather a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing" (381). Instead of 'blackening margins' with all kinds of paraphernalia from the outer world, rather than writing about a "blue and white checker inlaid majolicatopped table" (Joyce 1986, 610), one must write about universal concepts existing only inside language, about 'tables' and 'things' – or, again, about "no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names" (Beckett 2009a, 29). Literature, in short, would do better – at least no worse – to stay put in the insolvability of paradox rather than stubbornly persisting in the futility of "taking arms against a sea of troubles, torn by conflicting doubts" (Joyce 1986, 151). Then, and only then, when "the holes of words" are filled with nothingness and the blank page is 'stained' only with signifiers drained of semantic content, will it become possible for literature not to bypass its true subject, which is the "senseless, speechless, issueless misery" of (literature) itself.

Dante observes from the bridge hanging over the eighth *bolgia* how Ulysses and his partner in (war) crime Diomed are reborn in the form of a split flame amidst the devouring fires of Hell: "Within, Ulysses and Diomed, / are suffering in anger with each other, / just vengeance makes them march together now" (26.55-57). Struck with a burning desire to approach this dual flame, Dante is warned by his mentor to "see to it [his] tongue refrains from speaking" (26.72). He must remain silent and leave the speaking to Virgil – that is, to poetry: "So when the flame had reached us, and my guide / decided that the time and place were right, / he addressed them and I listened to him speaking" (26.76-78). The writer of literature follows a similar lead, Blanchot contends: "One rule says to him: 'You will not write, you will remain nothingness, you will keep silent, you will not know words.' The other rule says: 'Know nothing but words'" (1999, 369). One must, in other words, "Write to say something" (369), which is to say, one must set foot on the black boat of Ulysses and "blacken margins." But, as soon as this obscure quest has begun, however, one must also "Write to say nothing" (369). One must retreat in order for literature to speak (itself).

Joyce, contrarily, sails out into the world without ever looking back; he is at pains not only to name every single item but also to include all kinds of microscopic detail in his representations. As should be well familiar by now, however, signification always leaves behind an exteriority which cannot be rendered interior, a 'cadaver' as it were.[3] What Joyce then gathers on his black boat of *Ulysses* are not all the things/beings from the material world (as, for example, Noah did) but, instead, linguistic evidence of their abstract annihilation.[4] This noxious Ark still pursued a linear course, however, negating one thing after another. The boat's *Wake*, on the other hand, annihilates multiple entities at once by collapsing multiple words (and even languages) into each other via a "clappercoupling smeltingworks exprogressive process" (614). In this way, then, by having words march and suffer in anger with each other, "Who can say how many pseudostylic shamania, how few or how many of the most venerated public impostures, how very many piously forged palimpsests slipped in the first place by this morbid process from his pelagiarist pen?" (Joyce 2012, 181-82).

"From No Fatherland Away"

This essay, in sum, examined in what ways and to what extent the Ulysses-passage from *Molloy* may be said to concern not only the problematical notion of existential freedom but also Beckett's artistic freedom, especially in relation to Joyce. The argument is that Molloy's antagonistic movements can be read as expressing an indirect but nevertheless determined critique of the Joycean dialectic heading for predetermined shipwreck: "founded and founded

irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood" (Joyce 1986, 170).

Molloy finds himself stuck on a boat whose captain is famous precisely for his relentless and apparently tragic journeys out into the world. But if Molloy then crawls towards the boat's stern, it is not to fend off shipwreck; he is indifferent to the disaster ahead or at least refrains from any attempt to overcome it – after all, crawling eastwards on a boat sailing westwards might bear him 'onward' to no shipwreck but to shipwreck nonetheless. Molloy's turn is, if nothing else, a turn away from the dreary course *towards* shipwreck; he withdraws not from failure in general but specifically from the twisted logic of Joyce's volitional error: "because loss is his gain, he passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed" (Joyce 1986, 162). Following Dante rather than Ulysses, Joyce sets out to attain Paradise precisely by descending into Hell first, by sabotaging his vehicle and abandoning it in favour of a still more deadly backwash. Molloy follows with his eyes, however, how Joyce gets caught up in a perpetual loop of dialectical reversal: in short, Joyce's volitional error recuperates the very absence of synthesis *as* synthesis; it remedies dialectical deficiency with yet more dialectics. Thus, no matter how loud one laughs as one fails on purpose, as one wrecks and deserts one's vehicle, the violent slipstream is such that it still drags one along the same course towards ruin: "the spontaneous and affirmative reaction in the face of defeat or unpredictable chance [...] succeeds only if it is not intended; intended laughter always rings false" (Baugh, 87). Virgil (whose infernal detour never culminates in Paradise) puts it similarly: "laughter and tears follow so close upon / the passions that provoke them that the more / sincere the man, the less they obey his will" (Dante 1981, 21.106-8). To sum things up, the ferocious drive towards shipwreck manifests itself even in the reverse direction, albeit as an absence, as a trace or wake: "In forever reminding me thus of my duty, was its purpose to show me the folly of it? Perhaps" (Beckett 2009a, 88).

Molloy's contradictory movements are therefore also comparable to Blanchot's theory of literature, which holds that "Literature professes to be important while at the same time considering itself an object of doubt. It confirms itself as it disparages itself. It seeks itself: this is more than it has a right to do, because literature may be one of those things which deserve to be found but not to be sought" (1999, 359). To write is to fail, simply put, but to fail is not necessarily to write. Deliberate shipwreck would equate only to (literary) suicide; it expresses the writer's intention to deal with literature in the same way as with the world – by actively hunting it down and negating it. Engaging in volitional error therefore implies a betrayal rather than celebration of failure, which should not be turned into something accomplishable, into a potential success. Molloy, therefore, has "never been particularly resolute, I mean given to resolutions, but rather inclined to plunge headlong into the shit, without knowing who was shitting against whom or on which side I had the better chance of skulking with success" (Beckett 2009a, 30). Hence, perhaps, "the thought of suicide had little hold on [him]" (79). He does not solve the problem of life (and thus death), especially not by taking it away; that is, he neither wrecks nor abandons his vehicle but keeps slaving away within its constraints: "And to feel there was one direction at least in which I could go no further, without first getting wet, then drowned, was a blessing. For I have always said, First learn to walk, then you can take swimming lessons" (69). Beckett, likewise, does not break with his vehicle, language – at least not like Joyce did, "[receiving] through a portal vein the dialytically separated elements of precedent decomposition for the verypetpurpose of subsequent recombination" (Joyce 2012, 614). Beckett seemingly thinks it better to resign himself to the essential opposition between sadness and rejoicing, to the paradoxical nature of language as the necessary condition for the possibility of literature: "For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking no better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on" (Beckett 2009a, 47). Literature should be a matter of failing better, of waiting, of going on: "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. So I found it natural not to rush into it and, when I forgot myself to the point of trying, to stop in time. It's my only excuse" (68).

A matter of going on, but thus also of stopping in time, because any 'precaution' can easily be turned into a resolution: "Precautions are like resolutions, to be taken with precaution" (Beckett 2009a, 30). If, therefore, Molloy's retreat on the black boat, that is, if Beckett's withdrawal from volitional error "looks like rest, it is not, I vanish happy in that alien light, which must have once been mine, I am willing to believe it, then the anguish of return, I won't say where, I can't, to absence perhaps, you must return, that's all I know" (41). For Beckett, literature can be found neither by resolution nor by precaution; the writer, therefore, should neither aim for Paradise nor Hell: "And true enough the day came when the forest ended and I saw the light, the light of the plain, exactly as I had foreseen. But I did not see it from afar, trembling beyond the harsh trunks, as I had foreseen, but suddenly I was in it, I opened my eyes and saw I had arrived" (92). If anywhere, literature is stranded in the 'ditch' between the two poles: "The forest ended in a ditch, I don't know why, and it was in this ditch that I became aware of what had happened to me. I suppose it was the fall into the ditch that opened my eyes, for why would they have opened otherwise?" (92). Like Dante's Virgil, literature disappears as soon as Paradise comes into sight, and therefore, "like Belacqua, or Sordello, I forget" (7) and following Molloy who "could stay, where he happened to be" (93), the writer best make no attempt to overcome this purgatorial state, for it truly is "misery to stay, misery to go" (41).

Notes

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1. P. J. Murphy, for one, maintains that "References to Joyce's *Ulysses* are virtually non-existent. Moreover, most of Beckett's references to the Ulysses story are derived from the *Odyssey*, not from the Joycean rewriting of" (186).

2. Tucker (17) quotes Beckett from the "Philosophy Notes" (Trinity College Dublin MS 10967/189v) as saying that "Man has nothing to do in outer world."

3. "Of course my language does not kill anyone," Blanchot explains, "And yet: when I say, 'This woman,' real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction" (1999, 380). For more on the 'cadaver,' see Blanchot (1989, 254-63).

4. Musa observes that Ulysses is guilty of "military fraud" and "the abuse of a noble profession" (202). Thus also mutual sin connects Dante's Ulysses to Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is not only essentially fraudulent (cf. Blanchot) but also an overt demonstration of linguistic violence.

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