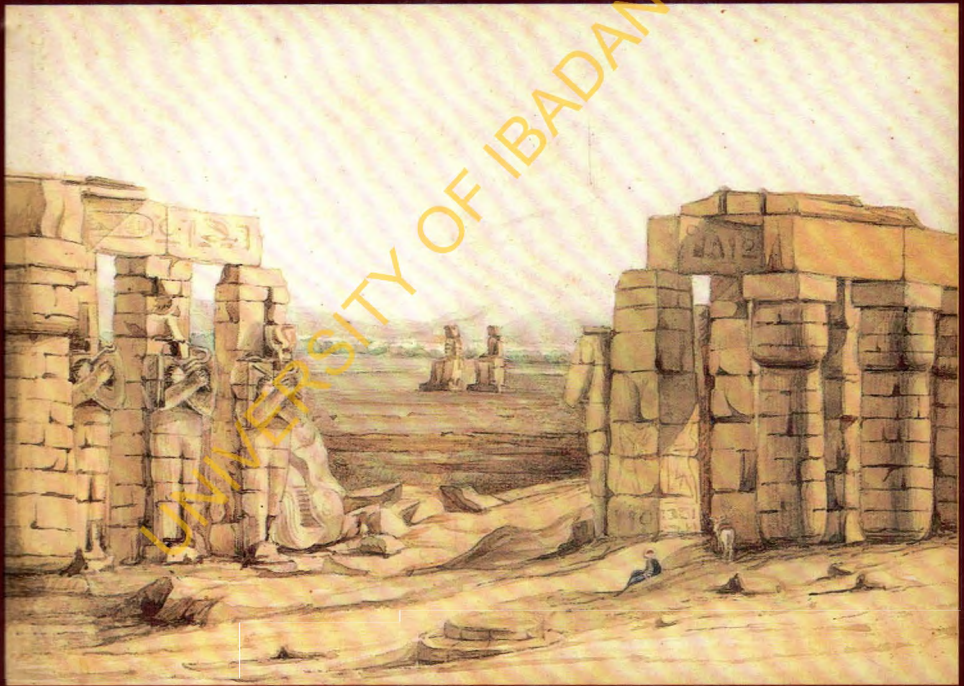


LITERARY INTER-RELATIONS: Ireland, Egypt, and the Far East

edited by
Mary Massoud



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IRISH FOLKTALES AND BECKETT'S MOLLOY: A STUDY IN TROPISM

DELE LAYIWOLA

The general tendency of a monographic study is to try to find a justification or a reason for its undertaking. There is always a purpose to which literary criticism aspires. If it is not establishing a canon, it is elucidating a style. And one such purpose is often to place a particular work in the context of a larger, meaningful whole: what is sometimes referred to as the concept of a history or a tradition. If we agree therefore that literature (like literary criticism) is often, consciously or otherwise, tendentious in this regard, the term 'tropism' as I have used it in the title of this paper, amounts to a tendency. Text and imagination, in the writings of Samuel Beckett, are often found to strain with great difficulty towards a stimulus and a root which are obscured by complex metaphors as well as by linguistic witticisms. This would appear to be the reason that some scholars prefer to study Beckett's prose writings in translation.

Leslie Hill (pp. 40-50), in sensing a certain nostalgic depth in the structure of Beckett's *Trilogy*, sought a linguistic explanation for a certain ambiguity in the persons of its three narrators: Molloy, Malone and Mahood. It is true that Beckett's main characters as well as narrators in the three novels of the *Trilogy* merely speak to identify themselves and their material existence, but no clue is given as to their true national or existential identity. Probably this is what led Hill to surmise that the problem of ambiguity or, in some respects, identity crisis, has to do with the fact that Beckett was writing in (and translating into) a language other

than his mother tongue. As he says, 'Though composed in one language, French, the novels gesture towards another, Anglo-Irish, and it is far from evident, in the original text, even how some of the names of the characters are to be pronounced' (p. 40). The pointer towards Irish origins are germane, but he goes on to predicate the hybrid status of the novels and their characters in the language and linguistic problem, adding: 'Though foreign in that it speaks a strange language, Beckett's text adopts that language to speak of something deeply familiar' (p. 40).

We are surprised by Hill's use of the expression 'deeply familiar' in connection with a text which he senses to be ambiguous and nostalgic. Why is it that Hill writes about Beckett's *Trilogy* the way he does? It is to be noted that Hill himself has benefited from Maurice Blanchot's book, *Le Livre à Venir* (1959), as we learn from his essay, 'The *Trilogy* Translated', from which we have been quoting. In discussing the ambiguous status of the title of the third novel, *The Unnamable*, he refers to Blanchot's idea:

Blanchot forcefully contends that the title refers more plausibly to the impersonal process which expropriates the narrator of all identity and which is none other than the fundamental movement of writing and language itself. In the title *L'Innomable*, distinctions between human and non-human, character and narrative voice are under threat of collapsing, leaving behind them an indeterminate flux of words in which all meaning becomes impossible. (Blanchot, p. 56)

In reacting to the problem of language and translation posed by Hill, what I have tried to do in the present essay is to insist that language, rather than inhibiting meaning, becomes the bearer of a whole world as history and as culture. Given Beckett's Anglo-Irish roots, therefore, the expropriation of identity which Blanchot and Hill perceived in his characters could be redeemed by illuminations from Irish folklore. Though the *Trilogy* had first been written in French, Beckett could not but translate his Irish roots into the language of another culture so that the result became a Franco-Irish text. The point also holds that a total understanding of the French text is impossible without a greater appreciation of Irish literary and folk traditions. In this connection we are reminded of T.S. Eliot's essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', where the point is made that no writer can be properly appreciated without being set in the context of all that has gone before (pp. 13-22 *passim*).

In situating Beckett's artistry within the repertory of Ireland's ancients, it is helpful to turn to the fables and legends of Ireland as recounted by Maureen Donegan. We generally find that the novel, *Molloy*, is full of attempts at defining identity. Often, the first person singular dominates Molloy's narration. The narrator (at times Molloy and at other times Jacques Moran), is full of self doubt. But this theme is underscored and even haunted by that of ageing and forgetting. To take the theme of ageing, a pristine model of it is found in the legend of the Irish knights, the Fianna. It is recorded as the experience of one of the Fianna, Fionn MacCumhail who is turned 'instantly from a strong man in his prime into a feeble old man' (Donegan, p. 104) through a spell. The spell is eventually removed through the application of an elixir from a red-gold drinking horn.

In Beckett's story, Molloy's mother ages abruptly. The same happens with Jacques Moran, Molloy's alter-ego in the second section of the novel. The process of ageing is so sudden that we are reminded of the spell in the fable. It turns out that the narrative sequence of the novel has been inverted. Part II should normally have been Part I, the life of Moran being actually antecedent to the life of Molloy. It also turns out that Beckett's main characters often speak against amnesia.

The continuous, almost cyclical perambulation of Molloy, and the unceasing private conversations he holds with himself or with his companions are reminiscent of the legendary figure in Irish fable, Maeldun, who goes on a cyclical voyage around the world looking for his master's murderer. The almost undiluted sense of duty with which Molloy seeks after his mother is strikingly similar to that of Maeldun seeking after his parents and home.

One last transposition of Irish folklore in *Molloy* is found in the episode where Molloy accidentally crushes a dog while riding his bicycle. The owner of the dog is a middle-aged lady by the name of Lousse. She saves Molloy from arrest and also from being mobbed. However, she insists that Molloy must carry the dead dog to her garden. After the dog has been buried in the garden, Molloy is persuaded to remain and to be adopted. This is how Molloy himself puts it:

I could not prevent her having a weakness for me, neither could she. I would live in her home, as though it were my own. I would have plenty to eat, and drink, to smoke too if I smoked, for nothing, and my remaining days would glide away without a care. . . . I would help in the garden, in the house, and when I wished, if I wished.

But with a proviso:

I would not go out on the street, for once out I would never find my way in again. (p. 45)

The Irish fable which most aptly reflects this theme is that in which Niamh, the Princess of Tír-na-nÓg was destined to marry Oisín, the son of Fionn MacCumhail of Erin. The King of Tír-na-nÓg had cast a spell on her daughter, Niamh, turning her golden head into that of a pig. It was predicted that he would lose his crown to his son-in-law. To prevent this, he uglified his daughter so that she would remain spouseless forever. However, the Druid who made the spell effective confessed to Niamh that she could be cured if she married a son of Fionn MacCumhail. She succeeded in marrying Oisín, and as Lousse did with Molloy, convinced him to stay in Tír-na-nÓg in order to be 'forever young' (p. 94). There is a proviso, should Oisín decide to go to Erin or wander out of the palace:

If you must go, I'll give you this white horse to take you back, but you must stay on it and not dismount. If your foot touches the ground of Erin, the horse will fly back here without you, and you will become an old man and we will never see each other again. (p. 96)

What appears to be the *agent provocateur* in both instances is the annulment of a pet, or animal – either a dog or a pig. In both cases that animal had become a burden to the owner. Lousse's dog is diseased, and she is actually taking it to a vet to have it destroyed. Similarly, Niamh's pig's head is a burden she plans to discard. Those who help in the discarding are led 'by pretended sympathy into acts incurring penalties'.

Some may argue that Beckett's sources do not necessarily infer Irish folkloric material. Although there may not be a one-to-one correspondence, it can hardly be denied that the cultural correspondence is there. In Beckett's writings, some models are acknowledged while others remain subconscious influences. Subconscious influences of the native tradition cannot be discounted. If we agree with T.S. Eliot that there are such influences, then it is one of the functions of literary criticism to unearth these sources and verify them (Eliot, pp. 23-24).

By way of conclusion, I should like to refer to that aspect of Beckett's solipsistic style which invariably derives from his profound understanding of seventeenth century philosophy,

particularly that of René Descartes. The novel, *Molloy*, is written throughout in the first person singular, drawing on some details verifiable from Beckett's own life. This has led Deirdre Bair to believe that the novel is autobiographical (p. 314). Although there are some autobiographical elements in the novel, Beckett's persistent use of a first person narrator actually goes back to his preoccupation with the meaning of existence; not the events of his life, but the idea of being and non-being, derived from Descartes and clearly expressed in his 'Second Meditation' (pp. 66-75). Beckett's first person narrator is a thinking, speaking being, as well as a perambulator:

But it is only since I ceased to live that I think of these things and the other things. . . . And of that life too I shall tell you perhaps one day, the day I know when I thought I knew I was merely existing. (p.25)

And Molloy, apart from thinking, engages in Cartesian doubts too:

For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. . . . Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be. (p. 46)

The point remains to be made that Beckett engages Irish motifs and other European philosophies to reflect on the problem of existence. Indeed, the most abstruse and the most universalized of literary tendencies in Beckett's works have their references in a verifiable tradition.