

MOLLOY:
As the Story Was Told.
Or not.

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Abstract

Narrative convention and expectation lead us to conceive of Molloy's narrative as a chronologically consistent account of a single journey, the events of which are causally, spatially and temporally related to each other. Drawing first upon the narration of the A and B episode, and then upon the evidence of the entire text, this article proposes that what Molloy relates is not, in fact, the story of a journey, nor of a journey, nor of a journey to his mother, but is, rather, an achronic narrative organised according to the sylleptic theme of Molloy's permanent condition of journeying around the figure of his mother.

It has not always been easy for critics to reach agreement where Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* is concerned. The very structure of the text has already achieved an almost legendary status within Beckettian criticism, such has been its capacity to engender responses to the enigma of the relationship between Molloy and Moran. Over a relatively short period of critical scrutiny the text has been subject to a bewildering range of readings, surely a testimony to its magnificent heterogeneity. Out of the hubbub of this critical conversation, however, there has emerged some measure of agreement on certain aspects of the text, foremost among them being the mythic overtones of both accounts, and specifically the quest narrative structure that appears to inform the evolution of both Molloy's and Moran's stories. Both narratives have consequently assumed a certain identity: Moran's account is the story of his quest to find Molloy, and Molloy's the story of his quest to reach his mother. It is, however, precisely the accepted status of one of these accounts as the story of an individual journey that this article wishes to question. Specifically, I would like to suggest that Molloy's narrative could be read as something other than the story of a journey he made to his mother.

If it is submitted that Molloy's text does indeed tell the story of a journey he made to his mother, it ought to be possible to identify — following the Aristotelian criteria for narrative wholeness — a

beginning, a middle, and an end. Whatever about the condition and status of the latter two, the beginning of the account of the journey to the mother has never been a subject of great contention within Beckettian criticism: not very far into his narrative Molloy announces, "je résolu d'aller voir ma mère".¹ From that moment on, Molloy is apparently on his way to visit his mother, and the remainder of the text apparently recounts the adventures and dramas of that journey.

For Molloy, however, the main narrative business has already been under way for quite a while. And not only does he consider himself to be already telling whatever it is he might be telling, he actually heavily insists on the fact, and location, of his beginning: "Voici mon commencement à moi. [...] Il m'a donné beaucoup de mal. [...] Voici mon commencement à moi. Ça doit signifier quelque chose, puisqu'ils le gardent. Le voici" (8-9). And we would do well to pay attention to the location of Molloy's beginning, as an examination of the narrativisation of the passage between this beginning and the announcement of the resolution to visit his mother — constituted by the A and B episode — reveals much about Molloy's story at the level of *discourse*. This passage, in fact, displays nothing less than Molloy's narrating *modus operandi*: that is to say, it discloses Molloy's narrativising principles and practices, and his attitude to and relationship with the raw material of his story. It is towards the end of the narration of the A and B episode that Molloy's idiosyncratic approach to the process of narrativisation is explicitly articulated, when Molloy himself becomes sufficiently sceptical at the fluid concatenation of the sequence to question its authenticity:

Et je confonds peut-être plusieurs occasions différentes, et les heures, [...]. Et ce fut peut-être un jour A à tel endroit, puis un autre B à tel autre, puis un troisième le rocher et moi, et ainsi de suite pour les autres composants, les vaches, le ciel, la mer, les montagnes.

(20)

From this perspective, the designation of his characters simply as A and B underlines their status as so many 'composants', as versatile, interchangeable elements to be transferred from one bit of a 'story' to another, to be shifted around at will, along with the elements of scenery, in order to create the desired narrative concatenation. On his own admission, Molloy's A and B narrative has been cobbled together in precisely this way: Molloy, sitting in his mother's bed, receives and

works with whatever comes to him, regardless of source, and regardless of potential temporal or spatial inconsistencies.

The fact that the 'main' narrative is governed by the same narrating principles that inform the A and B episode — a conclusion we must inevitably draw, given that, for Molloy, they are both part of the same narrative effort — has, of course, immediate implications for one's conception of the whole of the 'journey' narrative, and specifically, indeed, for one's conception of that narrative *as* a whole. Narrative convention and expectation demand that we see the latter as a chronologically consistent account of a single journey, the events of which, causally, spatially and temporally, clearly relate to each other. But this understanding of the narrative is precisely what has now been called into question. In fact, none of the terms of the traditional conception of the Molloy narrative as an account of 'a journey to his mother' stands up very well to scrutiny. Far from being the account of *a single* journey, there are grounds for understanding it as a composite narrative, constituted from bits and pieces of different 'stories'. And the text will also oblige us to reconsider whether the perception of it as an account either of a 'journey' or of a going 'to his mother' are any more tenable. The first task, then, of the discussion on the 'journey' narrative will be to reflect on this widely accepted reading of Molloy's narrative, before moving on to consider how it might be understood as other than a teleologically informed account of causally, spatially and temporally related events.

The very structure of the text, in fact, already sets up the possibility of reading the account as something of a compound narrative. The story² divides into three discrete sections, so structured by the central position — and its uniqueness in terms of Molloy's experience — of the relatively self-contained episode of his stay in Lousse's house. On either side of the Lousse section is to be found a set of much less self-contained events: before it, Molloy goes into town, goes back out to the country, then back into town again; after it, he leaves town, goes to the seaside, where he stays for a period of time before moving into the forest, eventually emerging from it and falling into a ditch. That this tripartite structure so readily suggests itself is due to Molloy's inability to posit convincingly the narrative links between the sections that would place them in relation to each other in a less obviously discrete fashion.

The terms of the accepted narrative description that are disturbed initially by the consideration of the effects of the principle of composite narrativisation are those that propose that Molloy is recounting either *a single* journey he made to his mother, or a *journey* at all, in the sense

of a group of temporally, causally and spatially related movements from his perch on the hill to his arrival in the ditch. These latter criteria will be examined individually, but, as becomes immediately clear, they are not mutually exclusive: temporal incongruities, for example, may also be causal ones, and vice versa. In fact, because indications of time and cause are so bound up with each other in narrative, inconsistencies or implausibilities are revealed precisely when one set of relations refuses to support or confirm the other.

The inability of Molloy's account to deal properly with time, specifically with the chronology of events, undermines its ostensible status as one recounting a single journey. One of the more memorable instances of temporal incongruence occurs when Molloy attempts to reconcile different appearances of the moon over a particular period of time. During his first night in Lousse's house he wakes up and notices "une énorme lune" (62) framed by his bedroom window. Confirmation that it is indeed a full moon is provided by his description of it a few pages later as "fière et pleine" (65). What puzzles Molloy, though, is that, one or two evenings previously, he had seen the moon "toute jeune et mince, renversée sur le dos, un copeau" (65), what he takes to be the new moon. Following the logic of the revolution of the moon, approximately two weeks have passed between the sighting of the new moon (when he 'saw' A and B) and the appearance of the full moon through the window of Lousse's house, yet Molloy had insisted that only two days had passed. Well might he ponder:

En ce cas ces quinze jours pleins ou presque, qu'étaient-ils devenus et où étaient-ils passés? Et comment concevoir la possibilité, quelle que fût leur teneur, de les faire tenir dans l'enchaînement si rigoureux d'incidents dont je venais de faire les frais?

(66)

Both of Molloy's attempts to explain the moon to himself serve only to highlight the principle of free composition that informs the construction of his story: he considers first, unconvincingly, that he had mistakenly identified the phases of one or other of the two moons, and then, even more damaging for the stability of the temporal indications so far provided, that 'mes nuits étaient sans lune' (67) and that he had not seen the moon at all that he had just claimed to have seen through the window, nor, presumably, that of either two days/two weeks previously. It is tempting to account for this instance of the contradictions in Molloy's chronology simply by employing the 'unreliable narrator' argument. Molloy is certainly that, but the

explanation is too easy in that it fails to address the implications of the temporal implausibility. It allows the story to preserve its status as an account of a chronologically consistent and temporally related series of events. A much more plausible assumption, particularly in light of Molloy's own speculations on possible explanations, is that his failure to posit successfully a logical temporal relation is due to the simple fact that there is no such relation at the level of events, between, in this instance, his observing A and B and his first night in Lousse's house.

The two events are narrated in a particular sequence in the story, and, in the absence of any specific indication situating them outside of their apparent chronological order, they are easily integrated into that very order, such is the weight of narrative convention and expectation. Their place in an order of narrated events confers on them a place in a temporal order and implies a relation with other events, which a close examination, however, refuses to sanction. The events under discussion here should properly be considered as achronies, as events "deprived of any temporal connection with other events",³ what Prince also characterises as "dateless event[s]". Molloy's narrative is riven with achronies, a property which embarrasses the temporal integrity of the single journey theory. Molloy had, in fact, already provided evidence about the nature of the temporal relations governing 'ces quinze jours' in his narration of the events *between* the appearances of the moons. At the end of his — he tells us — first day on his way to his mother, he settles down for the night in a ditch. But which night does he mean when he says "cette nuit-là"? "Je dis cette nuit, mais il y en eut plusieurs peut-être" (43). One night, many nights, any night: what is needed is simply *night*. From a typical night will come a typical event, here Molloy in a ditch. But even the token quality of the temporal indication of 'night' does not emerge intact from Molloy's continuing reflections: in the obligation to match event with temporal indication it is the former which Molloy considers to be the superior term of the relation: "Car cette nuit-là, [...] quand j'essaie d'y penser je ne trouve rien, pas de nuit proprement dite, seulement Molloy dans le fossé" (43).

But Molloy is at least consistent with his principle of composite narrative when, a few lines later, he remarks, referring to the start of the 'next' day of his journey: "Mais le matin, un matin, je le retrouve, le matin déjà avancé" (43). As any night, so any morning. Such an achronic structure runs completely counter to the notions of temporal wholeness and temporal connection inherent in the single journey theory. Molloy is narrating *as if* the events that constitute his story occurred once and *as if* they occurred in a chronological sequence constituting a single movement towards his mother, but the

contradictions in the temporal indications bespeak an account that draws upon and benefits from the shape the single journey framework accords but whose events have their provenance in the fragments of memories of many journeys in what will be revealed to have been a life of permanent journeying.

For the account to pass itself off credibly as being that of a single journey, there is a need for a certain amount of precision in the plotting of the temporal connections. Molloy's narrative, however, is impossibly vague on this score. The temporal framework and relations that he does set up in his narrative by stating that he set out on his journey in June, that he found himself in the forest in either autumn or winter, and that his journey ends in spring hardly constitute an irrefutable chronology, particularly when he can be hopelessly imprecise about the temporal connection between events, and when, on occasions, he falls into outright contradiction. Often, when he does try to be precise, he draws back, as he did when the phases of the moon proved recalcitrant, and as he does on another occasion when the initial temporal precision drifts into mere tokenism, into a half-hearted gesture towards meeting the expectations set up by narrative convention: "Et voilà comment débuta cette seconde journée, à moins que ce ne fût la troisième ou la quatrième" (45). Elsewhere, Molloy does not even try to be precise, which, in one sense, helps maintain the pose of the single journey framework, simply by not contradicting it. So, one learns no more than, for example, that he left Lousse's place "par une nuit chaude et sans air" (96), and one is given no temporal indication whatever to situate the moment of his departure from beside the sea and his move into the forest. But if the absence of precise temporal indications has the effect of not actively refuting the integrity of a single journey narrative, ultimately, by not reinforcing that narrative pose when invited so to do by the implied structure itself, the vagueness of Molloy's temporal connections suggests that the structure that characterises the account is, in fact, an achronic one.

As for the outright contradictions mentioned, they certainly do challenge the single journey theory. Molloy tells us that he set out on his journey sometime around the middle of June and that when he landed in the ditch it was spring; his journey lasted, therefore, between nine months and a year. That, of course, is to make the assumption that the spring in question is the first one to follow the June of his departure. This is indeed what is implied by the narrative pose, but the temporal indications referred to as contradictions are so precisely because they promote the idea, against the narrative's pose, that the journey extended beyond the implied story time of between nine months

and a year. On one of these occasions Molloy notes that he stayed 'un bon moment' with Lousse, before attempting to be more precise: "C'est vague, un bon moment, quelques mois peut-être, une année peut-être" (82). A one-year stay with Lousse, added to the period of anything between approximately one to nine months that elapsed between the forest and the ditch episodes (i.e. either late winter to early spring or early autumn to late spring),⁴ not to mention the periods directly before and after the Lousse sojourn, at the very least calls into question the reliability of the integrity and unity of the single timespan. As a result, one is less surprised when one reads a later indication, occurring at the beginning of the seaside episodes, which appears to extend hugely the implied story time. It is an indication, in fact, which is much more consistent with the condition of timelessness that is the true temporality of the narrative: "Et quant à dire ce que je devins, et où j'allai, dans les mois sinon les années qui suivirent, je n'en ai pas l'intention" (112).

The perception of the narrative as an account of events that took place over a period of something less than a year no longer seems tenable here: 'les années qui suivirent' can only belong to the timespan of the journey to the mother, which one had understood as taking no more than a year to complete. And if Molloy appears possibly to reduce this implied story time — or, perhaps, to contradict it — when he notes, "Mais afin de noircir encore quelques pages je dirai que je passai quelque temps au bord de la mer" (112), the effect is merely to weaken further the credibility of the temporal indications underpinning the single journey idea. Here, as elsewhere, Molloy's narrative does not appear to accord with a single nine-month to one-year period, but seems rather to be much more consistent with the limitlessness of the perpetual state of journeying of which Molloy's life consisted, a condition he will acknowledge towards the end of his account.

It follows, as already noted, that temporal inconsistencies will have effects on the coherence and plausibility of the causal connections proposed. Molloy, it must be said, frequently confesses his ignorance of the principles of causal laws. That his narrative seems plausible at all is due in great measure to what Roland Barthes implies as being the *misreading* that produces narrative coherence:

Tout laisse à penser, en effet, que le ressort de l'activité narrative est la confusion même de la consécution et de la conséquence, ce qui vient *après* étant lu dans le récit comme *causé par*; le récit serait, dans ce cas, une application systématique de l'erreur logique dénoncée par la scolastique sous la formule *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.⁵

Molloy's account, then, benefits from the operation of inferred causality identified by Barthes. But only to a point. There are moments when the consecutive arrangement of events so flouts the laws of probability that underpin the relation of cause and effect that the cobbled-together nature of Molloy's account seems undeniable. On his first evening in Lousse's house Molloy, having fallen asleep, awakens and gets up to inspect the bedroom he is in, checking the door and window as he does so. He then reflects:

Je trouvai mes béquilles, contre un fauteuil. On trouvera étrange que j'aie pu faire les mouvements que j'ai indiqués, sans leur secours. Je trouve cela étrange. On ne se rappelle pas tout de suite qui on est, au réveil.

(60)

Such movement, one has been led to believe, is completely impossible for Molloy, who is unable to move around without his crutches. The causal incoherence of it all, mocked by Molloy's flippant 'explanation' of his new-found mobility, serves to undermine quite radically the identity of the account as the story of a single journey, consisting of causally connected events. If the story completely fails to hold together at moments like these, it is because the achronic nature of the events displays itself so flagrantly. Which would explain, in the case of Molloy's miraculous mobility, why 'consécution' is not transformed into 'conséquence', why, indeed, 'consécution' has the effect here of thoroughly ridiculing the implied 'conséquence'.

This is not the only instance when consecutiveness serves to reveal the absence of consequence. For example, when Molloy wakes up the next(?) morning in Lousse's house, he notes that "[les meubles] étaient moins nombreux que dans la nuit" (68). No explanation is forthcoming for this curious state of affairs. Upon wider examination of the bedroom, Molloy observes that "chaque fois que j'en reprenais l'inspection elle me paraissait changée" (70). In both cases Molloy situates these events within a logical chronological order: in the first case it is that of a morning compared to the previous night, and in the second what one is invited to understand to be a short space of time on that same morning. All of which serve only to make the causal incongruities within specific spatio-temporal circumstances even more striking. Apparent temporal coherence here does not produce a probable effect from a posited cause.

Molloy's need to get the story told, to keep it moving along, often leads him into impasses, into spatial contradictions for which he has no

solution, and which, in one particular case, he does not even bother attempting to resolve: "Me voilà, sans me rappeler être sorti de la ville, sur les bords du canal. Le canal traverse la ville, je le sais, je le sais, il y en a même deux. Mais ces haies alors, ces champs? Ne te tourmente pas, Molloy" (40-41). In a case like this it is difficult to allay the suspicion that the broad settings of the story are not in fact drawn from a specific journey at all but are, rather, familiar, typical landscapes, which are being forced into unhappy coexistence in order to supply the minimum acceptable spatial indications needed to constitute the settings of a narrative. The spatial tokenism is evident from the perfunctory, imprecise settings that mark out the stages of Molloy's peregrinations: country, town, country, town, seaside, forest, plain. And when Molloy does get involved in a certain amount of elaboration, he succeeds only, by way of a sweeping inclusiveness and lack of specificity, in underlining the cardboard-backdrop nature of his settings, and in highlighting the fund of stock landscapes upon which he draws to situate the stages of his movement: "Car ma région n'était pas que forêt, loin de là. Mais il y avait aussi la plaine, la montagne et la mer, et quelques villes et villages, reliés entre eux par des routes, des chemins" (141). These vague, broad spatial indications lend themselves to causally noncommittal juxtaposition, but they also contribute to the sense of discreteness and to the unconvincing causality that characterise Molloy's narrative. As Dina Sherzer observes, speaking specifically of what she calls the "récit-passé" of Molloy's narrative:

Chaque séquence est un tableau indépendant: ce qui se passe dans une séquence n'est pas provoqué par ce qui a eu lieu dans la précédente, et n'a pas de répercussion sur la suivante. [...] Il n'existe ni une causalité événementielle, un événement en provoquant un autre, ni une causalité psychologique, des modifications de caractère expliquant les actions de Molloy.⁶

Sherzer's observation brings out nicely the discreteness of the events and existents of Molloy's story. And what she identifies as the independence from each other of different sequences lends itself completely to the idea of Molloy constructing his account on the basis of the juxtaposition of achronic events. They have taken place somewhere within the vast history of Molloy's constant journeying and are brought together, as desired by Molloy's narrativising needs and as permitted by the capricious functioning of his memory, to form a composite narrative representation of that nomadic existence. His story displays the structural features that characterised the A and B sequence,

suggesting that the methods of composition on display there extend — logically enough— into all of his narrative activity. Molloy acknowledges as much when recounting his stay by the sea, and, significantly, he employs the same formulation — “je confonds peut-être” — as he did earlier:

Mais je confonds peut-être avec un autre séjour, antérieur [...]. Mais je fonds peut-être en une seule deux occasions, et deux femmes, l'une qui vient vers moi, timidement, suivie des cris et des rires de ces compagnes, et l'autre qui s'éloigne, d'un pas plutôt décidé.

(123)

What one is being given, in other words, is the account of a number of events and episodes from Molloy's life of wandering, stitched together to form an achronic, paradigmatic composite narrative, representing Molloy's acknowledged permanent condition of journeying to and from his mother. And it is Molloy himself who, perhaps not altogether unknowingly, supplies the absolutely appropriate metaphor for his narrativising practice when he speaks of “une période de ma vie plus riche en illusions que celle que *j'échafaude* ici” (125-26; my italics), a term rendered by *Le Petit Robert* as “former par des combinaisons hâtives et fragiles”. It is precisely this principle of narrative juggling that produces an account that is neither the story of a *single* journey nor, it follows, of a *journey* at all, in the sense of a temporally, causally and spatially related and consistent set of events constituting a ‘single’ movement from his post on the hill to the bottom of the ditch.

The last term of the ‘a journey to his mother’ description of the narrative is equally open to question: Molloy's narrativising obliges us to reconsider the claim that his account relates his attempts *to visit his mother*. What is being called into question here is the whole teleological impulse of the story, the apparent drive to arrive at the implied goal of the telling, which ostensibly is guiding its entire articulation. But it is precisely this narrative dynamic that is absent from Molloy's account, despite what Molloy says about setting out to visit his mother. It may well be significant that Molloy does not specifically announce at the outset that he is about to tell us the story of a visit to his mother: he simply proclaims, “je résolu d'aller voir ma mère”. And the arbitrary and contingent manner in which he appears to happen upon this resolution translates, as the narrative progresses, into the feeblest of *filis conducteurs*: a fortuitous idea for Molloy does not provide the

foundation for a concrete teleology. Molloy may well announce that he decided to visit his mother, and may well head off on his 'chère bicyclette', but thereafter the drive to reach the mother no more than flickers in and out of his account, as if the act that ostensibly triggers a particular emplotment dynamic has little or no connection with what subsequently transpires.

Retrospectively, the structure that the narrative ultimately assumes confirms the spurious teleology of Molloy's story, as the only account of Molloy reaching and being with his mother that we get occurs not at the end of his story but at the beginning, almost immediately after Molloy has set off. In other words, he gives an account of visiting his mother *at the start* of what is supposed to be the story of the journey to visit his mother. The narrative that follows seems to suffer from this early analepsis (Molloy recalls previous visits to his mother); it is as if it has had the effect on the narrator of a prolepsis, as if Molloy anticipates at this moment in his narration the future recounting of being with his mother, and, having now done so, has had the *raison d'être* of his entire narrative removed. With the narrative's teleological pretensions having thus been so immediately satisfied, the remainder of the account is quite directionless: Molloy wanders around aimlessly, the goal of reaching his mother evoked less and less as the narrative progresses, and with any possible guidance that a destination would confer having an increasingly marginal impact.

The aimlessness of Molloy's narrative is a permanent feature, but there are occasions when it is particularly flagrant. A very early example — highlighting the immediate loss of a teleological impulse — occurs when Molloy reaches a town, directly after setting out on his bicycle (and directly after the account of previous visits to his mother). The town Molloy arrives in appears to be that of his mother, as is revealed in the conversation Molloy has with the "commissaire" at the police station. Molloy even notes, "Pour ce qui était de l'adresse de cette dernière [his mother], je l'ignorais, mais savais très bien m'y rendre, même dans l'obscurité" (33). Upon his release, however, Molloy makes no move whatever to go to her; instead, that same evening, he ends up in the countryside again. So much for the goal of reaching his mother.

The single most harmful sequence for the teleological pretensions of the story is that of Molloy's sojourn with Lousse. Molloy meets her the morning after the police station episode — let us accept for a moment Molloy's chronology, unreliable though it is ("le matin, un matin" is the precise temporal indication we get) — having come back into town from the countryside where he had spent the night. The stay

with Lousse occupies the centre of the narrative and accounts for about one-third of Molloy's text from the moment he announces his intention to visit his mother. Having made no attempt to get to his mother on the 'previous' day, Molloy now enters a phase of his wanderings where his journey to her simply ceases altogether. The Lousse sequence represents a period of almost complete stasis, and, in what is supposed to be the account of a journey to a fixed destination, almost flaunts its inappropriateness, its anti-teleological character. In the context of either the narrative of Molloy's journey or the journey itself, it represents the complete antithesis of movement or progress. Molloy's ostensible goal is virtually forgotten during the "quelques mois peut-être, une année peut-être" that he spends with Lousse. Much of the account of the Lousse sequence is given over to Molloy's ruminations upon such questions as his difficulty with words, the state of his health, and his sexual experiences. The accumulation of these reflections contributes to the effect of the whole Lousse sequence as an ironic refusal of the narrative to measure up to its early teleological potential.

The final section of the story — covering the events after the Lousse sequence — although ostensibly recounting the continuation of Molloy's journey, bears little resemblance to a teleological narrative, and bears little resemblance, indeed, to an account of Molloy on the way to his mother. And the moment when one might situate the abandonment of any pretence at attempting to reach the mother is to be found in the following passage, narrated soon after the departure from Lousse's house:

Ce que je peux affirmer, sans crainte de — sans crainte, c'est qu'il me devenait indifférent notamment de savoir dans quelle ville j'étais et si j'allais bientôt rejoindre ma mère afin de régler l'affaire qui nous intéressait. Et même la nature de cette affaire perdait de sa consistance, pour moi [...]. Et tout en me disant que le temps pressait et qu'il serait bientôt trop tard, [...] je me sentais qui dérivais vers d'autres soucis, d'autres spectres.

(105-06)

From this point on, the narrative is adrift, barely pretending any longer to be aiming at or moving towards its supposed original goal. What characterises this latter part of the narrative is the crumbling of the plot, the very mechanism, of course, which creates a teleological dynamic in narrative. Instead of the narration of events as so many stages on the way to the plot resolution, we find an increasing amount of reflection on Molloy's part, where it is impossible to speak of any

kind of advancement of the plot at all. Lengthy passages (e.g. 103-111) are devoted to a variety of Molloy's reflections, not to mention the digressive nine-page 'pierres à sucer' sequence. In the last forty pages of the story, there is a minimum number of setting changes, with Molloy simply recounting his moving — in a rather token fashion, one senses — first to beside the sea and then into the forest. One finds as well an insistence on Molloy's circular movements, a strikingly symbolic anti-teleological image at the very stage of the narrative when the plot should be bearing down upon its goal. And, as if to underscore the absence of a teleological dynamic, Molloy's narrative, finally, simply stops, with no effort whatsoever made to conclude. Molloy finds himself in a ditch, in sight of a town, but no nearer to his mother than he was when he came down from his observation post outside the town after the A and B episode. For a narrative that is supposed to be the account of a journey to a destination — a perfect metaphor for teleological narrative itself — its abject failure not merely to reach its destination but to make any progress at all is evidence of its inherent incapacity to live up to its billing as a teleological narrative.

The description of the Molloy narrative, then, as being the account of 'a journey to his mother' does not hold up very well under scrutiny. None of the terms of that description is, ultimately, appropriate to what actually goes on in the text: what one gets is not the story of *a* journey, of a *journey*, or of a journey *to his mother*. Whatever Molloy's hopes or intentions are when he begins his account, the narrative that unfolds displays none of the unity, coherence and direction of a story that aims at and moves towards a set destination.

To speak in such terms about Molloy's narrative seems to suggest that one can no longer speak of a story at all. If the causal, temporal and spatial indications so conspire against the prescriptions and probabilities of narrative convention, and if the 'single journey' plot so fails to hold together and direct Molloy's account, is there anything left to maintain coherence, and sameness, in the story? Is it in any way a coherent account of anything that could be summarised thematically, or in terms of emplotment? These questions are turning around concepts such as unity and connectedness, precisely the properties it has been claimed that Molloy's account does not display. Yet, for all its failures, Molloy's narrative does not descend into complete incoherence. An initial explanation for this might point to a measure of stability provided by the proper name. One conceives of a narrator in an autodiegetic narrative giving an account of his past experiences; narrator and character, therefore, are one and the same, an identity that survives — just about — from start to finish. The other guarantee of sameness — a

text of pure difference would be incoherent from the point of view of narrativity — is to be found in that character's actions. If the proposition of a single journey has proved to be untenable, the text nonetheless manages to establish, by way of the act of journeying, a sufficient degree of sameness within the actions and events that constitute Molloy's activity to keep at bay the danger of over-difference threatened by the various structural failures in his narrative.

It is in bringing together the notion of the achronic nature of the narrative structure and that of the narrative being organised around the theme of journeying that we may begin to construct an alternative identity for Molloy's account, an identity other than that of a specific journey to his mother. Let us recall that achronies — and I draw here upon Gérard Genette's narratological terminology, as proposed in *Figures III* — are events "dépourvus de toute référence temporelle, et que l'on ne peut situer d'aucune manière par rapport à ceux qui les entourent".⁷ Following on from this, a narrative with an achronic structure is one where the sequences of events that constitute the narrative are deprived of any temporal connection with other sequences of events.⁸ I have said that the actions and events of Molloy's journeying constitute an element of sameness, conferring a degree of coherence on his account. 'Journeying' in Molloy's narrative, however, is more of a condition than an event, suggesting a permanent state of exile, rootlessness, and wandering. Moving away from the notion of an individual journey and exploring instead the concepts of journeying/exile/rootlessness/wandering as a *permanent condition* is to expand greatly the temporal limits of the narrative — an expansion, as we have seen, sanctioned by the narrative's temporal indications — from covering, supposedly, something less than a year to covering more or less a lifetime. Molloy's account, then, becomes more intelligible, and more credible, when the events and sequences of events are read not as temporally, causally and spatially related, and as occurring in a restricted and precisely delimited period of time, but as individual, causally unrelated sequences drawn from a timespan extending as far as an adult life. Molloy's story, then, I would suggest, represents, in its own elliptic, episodic mode, Molloy's *life experience* of constant wandering and journeying.

And it is here that one may propose a precise alternative description of Molloy's account. The events, and particularly the sequences of events, narrated in Molloy's story do not constitute the chronology of the individual occurrences of a single journey Molloy made to his mother, but represent rather a grouping of achronic sequences brought together according to the principle of syllepsis. A

syллеptic principle of organisation is one where events and situations are grouped together according to a non-chronological principle, which might be temporal, geographical, spatial, thematic, etc. Where Molloy's narrative is concerned, I would suggest that the narrated events and situations are organised according to a principle of thematic syllepsis, and specifically according to the theme of journeying. Molloy, in other words, narrates events drawn from his life of journeying and wandering. Molloy's wandering is a *condition* as much as an activity, a condition of exile and alienation, of absence and isolation, of rootlessness and movement, all of which sub-themes constitute the overall metaphor and thematics of journeying, the sylleptic ordering device that lends coherence to Molloy's account, and that at the same time offers a solution to the aporia represented by Molloy's refractory spatio-temporal and causal indications.

Molloy himself makes clear on occasions that his narrative has a much wider temporal application than the single-journey timespan of one year, as, for instance, when he self-consciously situates himself in the position of one who, near the end of his days, is looking back over and evaluating his whole life: "Mais c'est seulement depuis que je ne vis plus que je pense, à ces choses-là et aux autres. C'est dans la tranquillité de la décomposition que je me rappelle cette longue émotion confuse que fut ma vie, et que je la juge" (39). And that life — and not just one year of it — upon which Molloy is now reflecting through his narrative, consisted of a *constant journeying around the figure of his mother*. It is Molloy himself who so conceives of his life:

Et tout seul, et depuis toujours, j'allais vers ma mère [...]. Et quand je n'y étais plus, j'étais à nouveau en route vers elle [...]. Et quand j'avais l'air d'y renoncer et de m'occuper d'autre chose ou de ne plus m'occuper de rien, en réalité je ne faisais que fourbir mes plans et chercher le chemin de sa maison.

(144-45)

If Molloy's story is to be read as 'a journey to his mother', it should only be in the sense that Molloy's *whole life* was a journeying around — broken by the occasional arrival at — what was the one fixed point in his existence: "Toute ma vie j'y avais tenu, je crois. Oui, dans la mesure où je pouvais tenir à quelque chose, toute une telle vie durant, j'avais tenu à régler cette affaire entre ma mère et moi, mais je n'avais pu le faire" (105-06). These latter two passages cited, with all their resonances of a life being retrospectively reflected upon and evaluated, confirm the all-embracing sweep, the life-ranging scope, of

his account. It is to just such a dimension that Molloy may well be alluding at the start, when he sets out the plan of his narrative programme: "Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c'en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi" (9). The latter, 'dying' story and the inventory of things ("parler des choses qui me restent, faire mes adieux, finir de mourir", 7) will be for later (ultimately told by Malone); Molloy's will be a final 'living' story, self-consciously envisaged as the defining account of the essence and truth of a life. In this sense it has a kind of valedictory status as regards "cette longue émotion confuse que fut ma vie". Although it may start out otherwise, this will become an account of Molloy's *life*, with the various achronic sequences as so many independent micro-narratives contributing to the paradigmatic collage that represents the life condition of Molloy's circular journeying around his mother.

The image of the circle is an appropriate one upon which to conclude. As every Beckettian scholar knows, the figure of the circle is regularly evoked in the trilogy to describe the direction of the protagonists' movements. The circle becomes an even more appropriate figure in the light of the reading of Molloy's narrative that I have proposed in this article. Not only does it represent the permanent condition of Molloy's turning around the fixed point of his mother, but it also, very pointedly, renders redundant the notions of beginning and end. In Molloy's mythological wandering, there *is* no beginning or end. It has become, precisely, a permanent *condition*, whose beginning has been effaced with time and whose end is endlessly withheld, a condition, indeed, that is, very appropriately, reflected in the 'beginning' and 'end' of Molloy's narrativisation. Molloy almost falls into his own narrative, as if the situations, events and cast of characters are already turning around endlessly in his head⁹ and as if he is arbitrarily presented with one point of entry instead of another. So it is that he happens upon A and B ("C'est ainsi que je vis A et B", 10). If it is indeed the beginning, as Molloy insists, it is so in the limited sense of it being the physical beginning of words on the page. As for the end, just as Molloy appears to fall into his account, so he falls out of it too, to the extent that falling into a ditch seems to represent as good a point as any simply to stop. Again, if it is an end, it is so only in so far as there are no more words on the page: it is not an end either in the sense of Molloy reaching his destination or of it representing a conclusion. Molloy fell into the narrative circle and falls out of it again. In this narrative organised according to the thematic syllepsis of circular journeying, there is no true beginning and no true end; there is only middle, an endless turning around, an endless continuation.

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951), 22. Further references to *Molloy* will be made by page-numbers in parentheses in the text of the article.
2. Although the article is considering the possibility that Molloy's text might not, in fact, constitute a story at all (in the sense of it being the story of an individual journey), I will, for reasons of clarity and convenience, continue to use the term, and its synonyms, to refer to that section of Molloy's text which is generally considered to recount the story of a journey he made to his mother.
3. Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln, Nebr.: U of Nebraska P, 1989), 1.
4. Molloy notes at one point in the account of his time in the forest that "[c]'était l'hiver, ça devait être l'hiver", only to reflect almost immediately that "[c]'était peut-être seulement l'automne" (147).
5. Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', in *Poétique du récit*, R. Barthes and others (Paris: Editions du Seuil, Collection Points, 1977), 7-57 (22).
6. Dina Sherzer, *Structure de la trilogie de Beckett: Molloy, Malone meurt, L'Innommable* (Paris-The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 33.
7. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972), 119.
8. While Genette's definition is not applicable to every event and to every sequence of events in Molloy's account, it is certainly an appropriate description of the overall structure and of the relationship between many sequences of events and between many individual events, to a sufficient degree for it to warrant its designation as an achronic narrative.
9. Molloy speaks of the "prochain passage" (9) of things in his head and of how "il passe des gens aussi" in his mind (ibid.; my italics).