Muddy Mouth: Beckett's Poetics of Tastelessness

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I had neither taste nor humour, I lost them early on.

--Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

What's that?

An egg?

By the Brothers Boot it stinks fresh.

Give it to Gillot.

--Samuel Beckett, "Whoroscope"

After his arbitrary arrest at the beginning of Beckett's novel, Molloy is taken away to the guardroom and offered some bread and tea by "a big fat woman dressed in black, or rather in mauve". This episode, which is central to Beckett's poetics of taste, deserves to be cited at some length:

I still wonder today if it wasn't the social worker. She was holding out to me on an odd saucer, a mug full of a greyish concoction which must have been green tea with saccharine and powdered milk. Nor was that all, for between mug and saucer a thick slab of dry bread was precariously lodged, so that I began to say, in kind of anguish, It's going to fall, it's going to fall, as if it mattered whether it fell or not. A moment later I myself was holding, in my trembling hands, this little pile of tottering disparates, in which the hard, the liquid and the soft were joined, without understanding how the transfer had been effected. Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, gratis and for nothing, something to

hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army is not better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defense, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady.

(235)

The ambivalent description of Molloy's rejection of the food ("I threw it to the ground, where it smashed to smithereens, or against the wall, far from me, with all my strength") foregrounds the indeterminacy of Beckett's apparently factual narrative, which had already been adumbrated by the indeterminate color of the woman's dress. Molloy's decision to throw the food away seems paradoxically motivated by the fear of failing to maintain its equilibrium and letting it fall onto the ground (the more general fear of collapse is emphasized throughout the book and extended to his incapacity to ride his bicycle or even remain seated for long periods because of his "short stiff leg" [234]). More importantly, perhaps, it expresses Molloy's urgent need to put an end to the unbearable noise of "chattering teeth" produced by the wobbling cup, which stands as a reminder of his own toothless mouth. But, above all, it is the liquid's overflow that prompts Molloy's violent rejection of the food the social worker offers him. His anguish reaches a climax when he realizes that the tea is threatening to sog the bread and mix all the ingredients of his "meal" together. Given the wealth of religious and theological allusions in Beckett's drama and fiction, it is impossible not

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¹ Malone, Beckett's other famous toothless character, is a dying old man who ritualizes the proximity of food and excrement by putting his full chamber pot on the table next to the bowl of soup. Like Molloy, he refuses to regard eating as a necessity and eats his soup "one time out of two, out of three, on an average" (7). See also Mercier's unexpected decision to destroy the cream horn Camier brought him at his request, crushing it between his fingers, his "staring eyes filled with tears" (186). As Lucien Dällenbach recently suggested (see footnote no2), the Moderns experience some difficulty in digesting the creamy and the onctuous.

to see in the image of sogged bread a reference to the Eucharist. A narrative of failed transubstantiation, *Molloy* oscillates between absence and presence, the literal and the symbolic, plunging Beckett's anti-hero into anxiety and confusion.

Molloy's definition of food as "something to hinder you from swooning" is indicative of his aversion to food as a mean of sustaining the body and keeping the senses awake, a prospect directly opposed to his oblomovian determination to savour the pleasures of "resting" (230), "forgetful of recent cares, indifferent to those at hand" (232). But Molloy's description of the meal as a "little pile of tottering disparates, in which the hard, the liquid and the soft were joined" clearly echoes Lucien Dällenbach's account of the culinary aversions of the moderns, according to which the discrete ingredients of a dish may be joined and juxtaposed but not mixed, for fear of their becoming part of a single, monstrously homogeneous preparation that conceals the actual conditions of its making. This scene also echoes the substory in Beckett's earlier novel Watt in which Mary insists on eating her onions and peppermints one by one and separately "first an onion, then a peppermint, then another onion, then another peppermint" (49-50). It is also reminiscent of the central (and most hilarious) eating scene in *Murphy*, where the protagonist's describes his "fourpenny lunch" as "a ritual vitiated by no base thoughts of nutrition", privileging the philosophical potential of food over its use value, allowing the meal's symmetry to alleviate his sense of confusion and isolation. That the perfect symmetry of Murphy's lunch extends to its price ("'A cup of tea and a packet of assorted biscuits.' Twopence the tea, twopence the biscuits, a perfectly balanced meal" [49]) gives him an opportunity to consider it from an economic point of view. Murphy's reduction of the meal to a business exchange is immediately followed by its conversion into a psychosexual transaction beginning with his acknowledgement that "he had only fourpence worth of confidence to play with" and ending with a successful attempt to swindle some extra hot water from Vera, the waitress, so that he ends up "paying for one cup of tea and consuming 1.83 cups approximately" (51). Having been offered a second fresh cup after complaining that the first one was Indian and he asked for China, Murphy, "the seedy solipsist", having decided that Vera is "incapable of betraying the slogan of her slavers, that since the customer or sucker was paying for his gutrot ten times what it

cost to produce and five times what it cost to fling in his face", is determined to "defer his complaints up to but not exceeding fifty per cent of his exploitation" (50):

With the fresh cup of tea Murphy adopted quite a new technique. He drank not more than a third of it and then waited till Vera happened to be passing.

"I am most fearfully sorry, "he said, "Vera, to give you all this trouble, but do you think it would be possible to have this filled with hot?"

Vera showing signs of bridling, Murphy uttered winningly the sesame.

I know I am a great nuisance, but they have been too generous with the cowjuice."

Generous and cowjuice were the keywords here. No waitress could hold out against their mingled overtones of gratitude and mammary organs. And Vera was essentially a waitress.

(50-51)

In Murphy's mind, which is dominated by the psychological theories of the Külpe school, applying the right verbal or gestural stimulus thus allows him to have his lunch and eat it too. Whatever we make of Murphy's alleged verbal manipulations of the waitress, the chief function of Beckett's ritualistic meals (see also my reading of "Dante and the Lobster" below) is to rescue the self from the threat of the indistinguishable and the unquantifiable. Applied to Beckett's own "minimalist" style, this strategy accounts, at least in part, for the author's gradual abandonment of the Joycean idiosyncracies of his early works and his decision to write a "lean", literal prose (as the closing sentence from *Watt* makes clear: "No symbols where none intended"), a style characterized by short, simple sentences and incremental repetitions, rebeginnings, alternations and permutations that both test the limits of the language of logic and, ultimately, undermine it from within. The effect of this writing style is perhaps best summarized by Celia who, listening to Murphy's voice, feels "spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did

not know what had been said. It was like difficult music heard for the first time" (23). Such passages exemplify the "self-obliterating" quality of Beckett's writing, of which the "impossible" description which brings *Molloy* to a close is another, more famous example ("Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.") Celia's analogy with "difficult" (by which she probably means atonal) music serves to remind us that the story of atonality itself was a story of exhaustion, that of major-minor keys and tonal hierarchies, whose literary (near-)equivalent is the hierarchised relationships between words within the sentences and paragraphs. Beckett's decision to deconstruct the sentence in his later work (added to his choice to write in French "parce qu'en français c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style" [xxxiv]) led to an increasingly dislocated syntax culminating in the unpunctuated blocks of prose of *How It Is* or the elliptical monologue of *Not I*.

Muddy Mouth

Food and orality remain central themes of Beckett's subsequent prose works. In *How It Is*, an unnamed narrator is seen dragging himself through the mud whilst carrying a sack of canned food. The narrator's body crawling in the mud is gradually reduced to a mouth filled with mud, hesitating between ingestion and expulsion, abandoning itself to mute matter, struggling with the question of nourishment but still hoping to envision "a fine image fine I mean in movement and colour blue and white of the clouds in the wind" (527):

the tongue gets clogged with mud that can happen too only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit it out it's one or the other and question is it nourishing and vistas last a moment with that

I fill my mouth with it that can happen too it's another of my resources last a moment with that and question if swallowed would it nourish and opening up of vistas they are good moments

From a syntactic point of view, it is as if the narrator's "muddy speech" could only spit out "incomplete" and repetitive statements whose accumulative effect embodies the process by which, in Mary Ann Caws's words, "definite statement is reduced to qualified determination, ... the easiest clichés of natural speech to linguistic fumblings ... [and] [t]he most frantic cries diminish in tone to a helpless polite monotony" (cited in Brienza 40). The reduction of Beckett's "narratives of consciouness" to a "diminished but not finished" form of expression ultimately efface the resilient traces of the speaker's subjectivity. To quote *Texts for Nothing*, "the subject dies before it comes to the verb" (Beckett, *Collected* 76).

A detailed examination of Beckett's use of repetition in the unpunctuated blocks of prose of How It Is and its capacity to neutralize traditional categories of causality and temporality would lie outside the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that here as elsewhere in Beckett's fiction, it has the effect of undermining the linear sequentiality of the narrative as a repeated word constantly refers back to its earlier avatars, cancelling them out at same time as it creates the expectation of more repetitions. Steven Connor has written that "repetition can sometimes involve the attempt to efface the signifier, so as to collapse the distinction between it and the signified. The compulsive repetitions of the child's demands for food, or of the language of pornography, both testify to the desire to make of the sign a substance, identical with what it signifies ... repetition can often be read as an attempt to close the gap between word and thing, even though it is repetition which insistently opens up that gap" (33). By likening the compulsive repetitiveness of Beckett's style to the child's nutritional demands, and by emphasizing its role in problematizing the relationships between signifier and signified, Connor unwittingly summarizes Beckett's poetics of hunger in a way that establishes him as an important representative of modernist gastroesthetics. As the mouth that speaks becomes the mouth that eats its own speech, it is only after breath and voice have been partially taken from him that Beckett's narrator is paradoxically in a position to choke off his desire for unmediated subjective expression and confront the enigma of a self-consuming, self-cancelling language.

Dante and the Lobster

To return to *Molloy* and the novel's gastrosophical considerations, the existential anguish experienced by Molloy in front of the meal offered by the social worker principally stems from his fear of seeing the precarious separation between solid and fluid collapse into the viscous, a state Sartre describes as an "aberrant mixture" which is "the revenge of the *en-soi* on the *pour-soi*". This aspect of Beckett's gastrometaphysics has so far received very little consideration on the part of critics, with the notable exception of Denise Gigante's recent essay "The Endgame of Taste", which considers the Romantic legacy of taste in *Molloy* and Sartre's *Nausea*. Gigante's ingenuous thesis is that Beckett revisits Sartre's nauseating pebble (a symbol of the existential disgust experienced by Antoine Roquentin in the opening pages of the novel) and transforms it into a collection of "sucking stones", also picked up from the seashore (Morton 184), which Molloy keeps in his pockets. Unlike Roquentin, however, who starts experiencing nausea "as soon as objects start existing in [his] hands" and begins to suffocate as "existence penetrates [him] from everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth" (180), Molloy warding off his fear of organic dysfunction in the act of sucking the round, smooth firmness of the pebbles:

I took a pebble from my pocket and sucked it. It was smooth, from having been sucked for so long, by me, and beaten by the storm. A little pebble in your mouth, round and smooth, appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, your thirst.

(238)

Molloy's preference for an imaginary, rather than a concrete, appeasement of his hunger and thirst is rooted in fantasies of regression which resonate with Kristeva's theory on the abject (as does the absent body of the protagonist's mother, which haunts him throughout the story). The act of sucking stones echoes the numerous dreams of infantile regression present in many of Beckett's other works. The function of the

pebbles as a substitute for the mother's reassuring, nurturing presence is confirmed by Molloy's toothless mouth, which, in this context, evokes that of a suckling baby at least as much as the loss of teeth caused by age. But Molloy also suggests that the threat of a forced motherly nourishment is still real, as suggested by the figure of the social worker (an ominous mother substitute whose ample, vigorous forms create a stark contrast with Molloy's infirm body) and her "charitable gesture" in the passage cited above. The practice of forced nourishment that takes place daily in prisons (and, by extension, that of enforced charity and motherly affection) becomes a nightmare from which Molloy is trying to awaken. Molloy, who at the beginning of the novel finds himself residing in his mother's room, not knowing "how [he] got there" and determined to "finish dying" (212) finds momentary respite from the arbitrariness and violence of the outside world by becoming "forgetful of [his] mother" (232) who brought [him] into the world, through the hole in her arse if [his] memory is correct" (225) and reminisces about the "first taste of the shit" with which his coming into being is now associated. The link between poverty and abjection evidenced in Molloy's reflection that "to him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth" [235]), added to his description of himself "bent double over a heap of muck, in the hope of finding something to disgust [him] from eating", establish his status as an absurdist avatar of Dällenbach's ascetic modern,² a literally tasteless creature obsessed

Dans la lutte viscérale que se livrent depuis la nuit des temps les Gras et les Maigres, on pouvait légitimement s'attendre que les Modernes se rangent du côté de la minceur. Partisans convaincus du frugal, du non-frelaté et d'un mode de préparation qui traite les ingrédients d'un mets en exaltant leur quant-à-soi gustatif souligné d'ailleurs par le caractère discret de leur disposition sur l'assiette, ces petits mangeurs ne pouvaient que pactiser avec la Nouvelle Cuisine contre la grande gastronomie française. Culte

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² In his recent book on the poetics of the mosaic Lucien Dällenbach suggests that one way of understanding the birth of modernism is to consider it in the larger context of the "visceral fight that has opposed the fat and the skinny since the beginning of time". For Dällenbach, the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns thus boils down to "la querelle des gras et les maigres":

with a primal gustatory scene of abjection and eventually lasping down to the bottom of a ditch, hoping to "roll on to [his] mother's door" (328) (although this may be too strong a word as Molloy himself eventually describes his longing to "go back into the forest" as "not a real longing" [329]).

Much has been written about the mathematical method that underlies Molloy's sucking stones ritual. In a now famous "monologue" which has widely been interpreted as an "absurdist" attack on rational thinking and its claims to absolute (self-)control, Molloy attempts to distribute sixteen stones in his four pockets and tries every possible arrangement so that he can suck them in the same order over and over again.³ But no matter what we make of his compulsive attempts to regulate the traffic of the stones from pocket to mouth and back to pocket, what matters at the end as that Molloy eventually acknowledges that "they all tasted exactly the same" so that "the solution [he] rallie[d] in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which [he] kept now in one pocket, now another, and which of course [he] soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed" (305). As Gigante puts it, "where there is no taste, there is only taste for Molloy, who not only fails to distinguish between tastes and smells that do exist, but who makes fine distinctions among stones that he admits have no taste" (195). Molloy's metaphysics of orality thus stresses the "disinterestedness necessary to exercise taste" (195), an attitude which defines the subject "according to a general economy in which waste and taste lose all distinction" (184). Gigante's appeal to Bataille's "general economies" seems apt indeed, as Molloy's consumption of the stones seems to point in the direction of unutilizable and meaningless forms of

bourgeois du copieux, science inégalée des apprêts: cela déjà aurait suffi à la leur faire prendre en grippe.

(115)

³ This passage from Molloy belongs in the second, "problem-solving" category of permutation/repetition identified by Bruce Kawin: (1) "Listing every relevant fact or object in an attempt to fence in the phenomenon …"; (2) "Listing the logical permutations in an attempt at problem solving …"; and (3) "Carrying logical permutation to the language itself" (cited in Brienza 34).

expenditure "ultimately linked to the efficacity not only beyond all consumption but also beyond the inconsumable" (176).⁴

Another significant cooking and eating scene occurs in Beckett's early story "Dante and the Lobster", when the protagonist Belacqua Shuah (named after Dante's Belacqua, the lazy musician whose late conversion led him to spend the length of his mortal life in the Ante-Purgatory) painstakingly describes the preparation of his lunch toast:

The first thing to do was to lock the door. Now nobody could come at him. He deployed an old *Herald* and smoothed it out on the table. The rather handsome face of McCabe the assassin stared up at him. Then he lit the gas-ring and unhooked the square flat toaster, asbestos grill, from its nail and set in precisely on the flame. He found that he had to lower the flame. Toast must not on any account be done too rapidly. For bread to be toasted as it ought, through and through, it must be done on a mild steady flame. Otherwise you only charred the outside and left the pith as sodden as before. If there was one thing he abominated more than another it was to feel his teeth meet in a bathos of pith and dough.

(9)

Belacqua, who cannot stand the sight or taste of the spongy bread pith, observes the "soft of the bread", "spongy and warm, alive" and concurs that "he would very soon take that plush feel off it, by God but he would very quickly take that white fat look off its face" (9). Poised between the raw and the cooked, the animate and the inanimate, Beckett's toasting scene is a concrete prelude to a symbolic act of

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⁴ On Bataille's distinction between "restricted" economies of meaningful, waste-free circulation and "general" economies of meaningless expenditure, see his *Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Vol. 1. New York: Zone, 1991.

cannibalism.⁵ But in order to spare his teeth the "bathos of pith and dough", the personified bread cut which Belacqua lays against his cheek--in an attempt to feel its moist, alive presence--must be ingested after it has been transformed back into a (dry) thing whose reassuring roundness ("a pair of neat rounds of raw bread" [9]) are the necessarily condition for a happy, successful meal prepared and consumed in "complete quite and privacy" (8). By contrast, the slice of Gorgonzola cheese which Belacqua later inserts between the two bread slices, must stench and feel "alive" (12) in order to qualify as a suitable ingredient for Belacqua's meal. "A faint fragrance of corruption" does not suffice, he concludes. "He did not want fragrance, he wasn't a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench" [12]). In Levi-Straussian terms, the piece of cheese emblematizes the cultural appropriation of the natural "rotten". Its insertion between the dry and odorless slabs represents a regressive mode of eating, the return of the natural repressed and its cultural appropriation by excessively refined culinary tastes.

But the climax of "Dante and the Lobster" takes place at the end of the story when Belacqua goes to a fishmonger's and buys a lobster for his aunt. The fishmonger insist that the lobster is "lepping fresh" and Belacqua assumes that it has "very recently been killed" (16). Belacqua then goes to his Italian lesson during which the crustacean is nearly stolen by a cat. Shortly after his arrival at his aunt's house, Belacqua is horrified to discover that the lobster is still alive and moving. His aunt, ignoring his protests, insists that lobsters must be boiled alive and proceeds to boil the beast. Belacqua slowly recovers from his feeling of sickness and concludes that it will not be a quick death. The choice of the lobster was no doubt inspired by the recognition that the animal's agony will be slow (the narrator claims that it had about thirty seconds to live but scientific evidence suggest that they can survive up to 30 minutes or more) and therefore echo a number of central death-related motifs in Beckett's work. As for the lobster itself, it is a liminal creature whose texture and status within the animal reign

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⁵ While this chapter examines the eating scenes of Beckett fiction an equally detailed study could be devoted the fantasies of being eaten that invade his characters' consciousness. See, for example, the "Unnamable" study detailed study could be devoted the fantasies of being eaten that invade his characters' consciousness. See, for example, the "Unnamable" study detailed study could be devoted the fantasies of being eaten that invade his characters' consciousness. See, for example, the "Unnamable" study could be devoted the fantasies of being eaten that invade his characters' consciousness. See, for example, the

can inspire a repugnance not unlike that which Sartre felt towards the viscous. Once asked by Simone de Beauvoir about his least favorite food, he declared that crustaceans disgusted him because eating them was "like eating things from another world". More than anything, it is the idea of having to "extirpate" the flesh from a "near-mineral object" (Onfray 133) which repelled the philosopher. Once again, the confusion between two states which should remain separate, whether it be the organic and the mineral (the lobster) or the fluid and the solid (the viscous). The lobster, like the viscous, "has the dubious character of a 'substance between two states". Located between *l'en-soi* (the world of objects which exists independently from human consciousness) and *le pour-soi* (the capacity of human beings to be self-conscious), the viscous enacts such an impossible compromise between subject and object, being and consciousness, action and inaction. This "compromising" matter is potentially dangerous as "once it is believed to be possessed, there occurs a curious reversal by which it begins to possess me" (655). For Sartre, as for Belacqua, touching (not to mention eating) the viscous amounts to "risking losing oneself in viscosity" (656), a risk which culminates in Roquentin's disgust for his own "slimy" tongue.