

“ 'Tis my muse will have it so”: Four Dimensions of Scatology in *Molloy*

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*Writers have long employed scatology for shock value, satire, grotesque humor, and as a stimulus for philosophizing. In *Molloy*, Samuel Beckett employs scatology not only for satire but as a touchstone in examining the themes of language, creativity, religion, and existentialism. Beckett uses excrement as a metaphor to pursue his theories of language as excess. This leads naturally to the topic of creativity, which psychologists had associated with defecation in the infant mind, and to mythology, where we also find the association with creation. In looking at religion, the scatological can be elevated alchemically through psychology and mythology, or it can be used satirically to bring religion down—Molloy traverses both paths, scrutinizing Catholicism in particular. Finally, excrement functions in the novel as a leveler, both among humans and of humans, suggesting that much of the sentiment behind the shame, disgust, and evasion of excrement is rooted in existential anxiety.*

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The night will come when the Academy of Science itself will not disdain to plunge its gaze into the sewers of the world.

—MAX ERNST, *A LITTLE GIRL DREAMS OF TAKING THE VEIL* (7)

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We see an undeniable asymmetry when we look at the culture-producing properties of biological imperatives. Diet and eating account for an enormous proportion of what we refer to collectively as “culture,” occupying a central or foundational position in most social events, celebrations, holidays, and rituals. At the other end, we find nearly the opposite situation—the “afterlife” of food is more often than not seen as antithetical to culture. While eating is made a focus of social life, excrement is pushed as far into the margins as possible. The scatological works of artists and writers (and, I would add, psychoanalysts) are an intellectual corrective—sometimes subversive, often humorous—to this asymmetry.

For example, Luis Buñuel draws attention to this lopsided aspect of society in a sequence from his *Phantoms of Liberty*. Guests arrive at an upper-middle-class home for what appears to be a dinner party but are then seated around the table on toilets (after dropping their pants, of course). The guests smoke, read newspapers, and discuss current events (including how much human waste the world can expect in the future if population projections are accurate), and a child is told to watch her language when she mentions that she is hungry. One guest then excuses himself and goes to a small closet down the hall to eat and drink, making sure to lock the door.

Historically, a similar imbalance can be seen in the world of letters. In addition to outright censorship, there was very little critical and theoretical acknowledgement of or commentary on scatology, considering the great amount of it in literature. Ever since Bakhtin’s work came to prominence—and especially since “the body” became a popular focus in literary studies—there has been a steady countermeasure to this. More recently, we have since seen a wealth of criticism focused on excrement in literature—perhaps, some might argue, a surfeit, for the power of scatological writing rests precisely in the marginality of excrement. But the margin still holds—the sewers are in no danger of running over. As much of this recent criticism has pointed out, the uses of scatology in literature are many but include (ultra-) realist detail, grotesque humor, shock value, a means of satire, and more rarely, a stimulus, however base, to higher thought.

In *Molloy*, Samuel Beckett employs scatology to all of these purposes in ways that, far from being gratuitous, are integral to the larger themes of the novel. This article considers primarily Beckett’s use of scatology for the purposes of satire and philosophical speculation as applied to the topics of language, creativity, religion, and the human condition. My examination of *Molloy* implicitly presents the novel as both satirical and constructive. By bringing together a wide range of historical precedents, I show that, while the novel is in its own way exemplary of modernism/postmodernism, it also belongs to a long tradition of scatological writing. All of this is not to downplay the humor in Beckett’s scatological humor. That it is funny is taken as granted—I want to consider why and how it is funny.

EXCREMENT AND LANGUAGE

In one of the funniest scenes in the novel, a policeman asks Molloy for his “papers,” and Molloy presents, right under the policeman’s nose, the only papers

he has: “bits of newspaper. To wipe myself with, you understand, when I have a stool” (26). Molloy’s literal connection of words and excrement is rich with symbolic significance, and the scene is a crystallization of one of the novel’s primary themes: “that all language was an excess of language” (159). Language is frequently an excess production, just as excrement is that which the body cannot use.¹ Yet with the metaphor of excrement comes also the ambiguity—language in the novel is both excessive and deficient: “I always say either too much or too little, which is a terrible thing for a man with a passion for the truth like mine” (45). And just as Molloy confuses east and west and inverts the poles, the novel’s loose interrogation of language drifts between coordinates of excess and deficiency as well as speaking and writing.

Various excesses of language are embedded in the text, from pleonasm—“free, gratis, and for nothing” (30), “in a word I struck camp” (208)—to nonsensical hyperbole—“I fell, literally boneless” (73). Both Molloy and Moran are particularly concerned about verb tenses—“this should all be re-written in the pluperfect” (20), “it’s the mythological present” (34), “a simple prophetic present” (149), “at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?” (47). This fascination with grammar also accords with the question of the excess or deficiency of language, for grammar is by nature descriptive (not prescriptive, as many people assume), but it aims for a minimum of description. But leaving the pragmatic minimum and the desire for mathematical elegance aside, could we not have an expanded grammar as well? Is not there, after all, a “prophetic present” tense?

The topic of grammar also raises questions in the opposite direction—how much grammatical structure, really, is necessary? English has no future tense and no longer has nominal case inflection; Russian has no present perfect and no definite article; Bulgarian has no infinitive; Chinese, unlike most European languages, has no gender, and European languages, unlike Chinese, do not have tones.² Is there a minimum of grammar? Or vocabulary?

Beckett was interested in linguistic minimalism throughout his career, most prominently demonstrated in *Act Without Words I and II* (1956) and *Film* (1965). In his essay on Dante, Bruno, Vico, and Joyce, he writes that “in its first dumb form, language was gesture. If a man wanted to say ‘sea,’ he pointed to the sea” (24). Molloy in particular has problems communicating³—“this trouble I had in understanding not only what others said to me, but also what I said to them”—and reverts to gesture and physical contact in communicating with his mother, “by knocking on her skull. One knock meant yes, two no, three I don’t know, four money, five goodbye” (22). Later, when he has a communication problem with the charcoal burner, he responds in the same way, but more violently, “deal[ing] him a good dint on the skull” (113). Communication may be implicated in Moran’s murderous encounter as well, as, after killing his man in a similar manner, Moran finds an “ear” on the ground. We may also have an allegory of language and speech in the famous “sucking stone” sequence, where the stones, going in and out of the mouth, could stand for words, which Molloy agonizes over putting into proper sequence. Such an allegory also fits into the “language as excess” theme: “deep

down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same.” His solution: “throw away all the stones but one” (100). We are back, then, to a minimum—he needs only one rock, just as he needs only one unambiguous word with his mother: “that she should confuse yes, no, I don’t know and goodbye, was all the same to me, I confused them myself. But that she should associate the four knocks with anything but money was something to be avoided at all costs” (22).

The theme of minimal language or, rather, communication, is extended beyond human language—first, in the parrot, whose “language” is offensively scatological—“*putain de merde!*” (49; “Holy Shit!”) and then in the bees.⁴ The two cases present an interesting contrast, as the parrot uses words but does not communicate and does not “understand” what it says, while the bees communicate without using words. Both scenarios are present in *Molloy*: “the words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect” (67), with the added ironic reversal here that the “buzzing” of the bees conveys meaning in the end, whereas words do not.

Moran’s description of the man he ends up killing explicitly links speech with excrement: he had “a thin red mouth that looked as if it was raw from trying to shit its tongue” (206). The same connection is implied by the pun in “*oratio recta*” (119), and the link between the mouth and anus is made several times, as when Moran asks his son if he knows “which mouth” to put the thermometer in (161) and in Molloy’s (mock) poetic/rhetorical question: “We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arse-hole and affect to despise it. But is it not rather the true portal of our being and the celebrated mouth no more than the kitchen-door” (197–198).

In considering the ways in which Beckett links excrement with the written word and with literature in particular, let us return to the scene with the policeman and the “papers.” Molloy, like Leopold Bloom before him, is employing the printed page in a utilitarian function which has a long history. Sir William Cornwallis, essayist and friend of Ben Jonson, wrote:

Pamphlets and lying Stories, and News, and two penny Poets I would knowe them, but beware of beeing familiar with them, for they lie in my privy, and when I come thither, and have occasion to imploy it, I read them, halfe a side at once is my ordinary, which when I have read, I use in that kind, that waste paper is most subject to, but to cleanlier profit. (Qtd. in Schmigdall 80)

In the case of Bloom and Cornwallis, their act is not strictly practical, but also an insult to the written material. This may be the case with Molloy as well. We learn later that in the winter he wraps himself in newspaper, specifically the *Times Literary Supplement* because of its “toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it” (39). After writing that he will not write details of the murder, Moran states that he does not “intend to give way to literature” (207). He has a sense for the literary, but will not indulge it. In addition to murder, he considers

the scatological a literary category: "I was succumbing to other affections, that is not the word, intestinal for the most part. I would have described them once, not now, I am sorry, it would have been worth reading" (228). This, of course, is pure irony, given the abundance of "intestinal" description in his report. But it highlights the fact that he is aware of it and that he considers it "worth reading," as does Molloy: "are not these significant facts" (108), the lack of question mark leaving no doubt as to his answer.

In his *History of Shit*, Dominique Laporte writes:

no doubt beautiful language has more than a little to do with shit, and style itself grows more precious the more exquisitely motivated by waste. Proof of this lies in the pedantry of the countless anonymous poems found even in today's latrines, or in the obscene syntactic contortions of those marginal literatures that elevate the excremental to a form of art. (10)

Laporte's language becomes ambivalent in this passage, which is to be expected, as ambivalence is perhaps the most constant quality of scatological writing. But Beckett stands in a long line of literary luminaries who did not hesitate to wax scatological, including Joyce, Kafka, Mann, Thoreau, Carlyle, Coleridge, Blake, Swift, Pope, Jonson, Shakespeare, Rabelais, and Chaucer, to name just a few. Joyce's Shem writes not only *about* but *with* excrement, as does the poet Sherman Krebbs in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*.

The use of excrement as a medium has become almost commonplace in painting and sculpture these days, but it was in practice even in Apollinaire's day: "I am not in awe of art and I have no prejudice against any materials used by painters. Mosaicists paint in marble or coloured wood. We have heard of an Italian painter who painted in shit; in the French Revolution someone painted with blood" (56). Shortly after Apollinaire wrote this, the Dadaists proclaimed that "*Kunst ist Scheisse*" and Duchamp hung his urinal, and not long after Beckett wrote *Molloy*, the Italian artist Piero Manzoni produced "Merda d'artista"—ninety cans, each containing thirty grams of shit, each of which he sold for the price of thirty grams of gold. Compared to such extremes, the scatology in *Molloy* might even seem minimal, a realization which could echo Molloy's: "After all it's not excessive. . . . Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it" (39).

The topic of writing pervades the novel on a number of levels. The book's two sections are ostensibly reports written by Molloy and Moran, both of whom claim to be under orders and not pleased about it: "All is tedious, in this relation that is forced upon me" (180). Moran calls his writing "paltry scrivining" (80) and often bitterly retorts "he'll get his report." Molloy remarks that "you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery" (16). There is ample nihilism or at least darkness here, enough to cover writer as well as reader. Literary critics are perhaps especially implicated—they who "blacken margins" with their notes.

Moran makes the etymological connection, through *textus*, of writing and weaving, which, accompanied by the image of the shuttle taken from Job, makes visual and kinetic connections as well: “weaving inexorably back and forth and devouring my page” (182). Keeping the *weaving* metaphor in mind, Moran does, in the end, obliterate his text(iles) with excrement: “my drawers . . . had rotted, from constant contact with my incontinences” (234). Another kinetic/visual image of writing/reading appears in one of Molloy’s many passages on the moon, which moves from left to right across his room—“its tranquil course was written on the walls.” Again, he is quick to equate the moon and its left-right motion with the Bakhtinian “downward motion”: “it must be her arse she shows us always” (52). The sucking stone sequence, which we have previously equated with speech, also contains a similar image that corresponds to writing/reading—due to unequal distribution of stones in his pockets, Molloy is “dragged to the right hand and the left, backwards and forwards” (100).

We have noted Moran’s contempt for literature, but, characteristically, he contradicts himself on this. In places he shows a clear concern for the literary, perhaps most intriguingly in the opening and closing lines of his section, which opens much more like a novel or story than a “report.” The closing lines repeat the opening lines and then negate them—it is Moran’s confession that he does, indeed, “give way to literature” (207).

Toward the end of Moran’s narrative, he gives the tongue-in-cheek observation: “sometimes you would think I was writing for the public” (232). This exemplifies another way in which the text is loaded on multiple levels with a (hyper) consciousness of writing. Some of Moran’s musings on writing and literature, if read polyphonically, seem to include Beckett’s voice as well: “in writing these lines I know in what danger I am of offending him whose favour I know I should court, now more than ever” (181). For Moran, “him” implies Youdi. For Beckett, the reader—in which case, we have an instance of the mock *apologia pro sua stercus*⁵ which often accompanies scatological writing. Swift was a master of this:

I hope the gentle Reader will excuse me for dwelling on these and the like Particulars, which however insignificant they may appear to grovelling vulgar Minds, yet will certainly help a Philosopher to enlarge his Thoughts and Imagination, and apply them to the Benefit of public as well as private Life. . . . (89)

Molloy offers a similar apology in his section: “I apologize for having to revert to this lewd orifice, ‘tis my muse will have it so” (107). In linking excrement and creativity, he has invoked another age-old scatological tradition and an association deeply rooted in the psyche.

EXCREMENT AND CREATIVITY

In one of his many scatological vignettes, Gulliver notes that “Men are never so Serious, Thoughtful, and Intent, as when they are at Stool” (Swift 178). Swift was the most extensively and consistently scatological writer of his day, but he was by

no means the only one. Raymond Stephanson notes that “within the collective imagination of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers and readers, male brains could be made analogous to the body’s nether regions in various fashion: as wombs issuing book-children (or deformed offspring), as male genitalia, and as arsholes shitting words and paper” (113). He cites such a verse from Edward Ward:

My Tail Prophetick Poems should excrete;
I’d Rise Arse upwards e’ery Day by-time;
On Boghouse Walls I’d digitize my Wit,
And shitten luck should wait upon my Rhimes. (Qtd. in Stephanson114)

Ward and Swift used scatology in their writings most often, though not always, for satirical purposes. Yet the connection between excrement and artistic production, creativity, and generation is certainly not limited to satire. Nor is it much constrained by time and place. In the European tradition, certain centuries could be said to be more scatological than others, but the association of excrement and creativity/production seems to be universal.

Excrement plays a large role in mythologies the world over, often specifically in creation myths (the number increases dramatically if we read “dirt” or “clay” as excrement, which the myths themselves often do).⁶ Dung has neutral or negative associations in the Hebrew Bible (more on this in the next section), and the creation myth found in Genesis probably does not belong to this class (unless we read the “dust” of the second, or Jahwist, version of the Creation as excrement). Beckett makes up for this, though, through the first of Moran’s theological questions: “What value is to be attached to the theory that Eve sprang, not from Adam’s rib, but from a tumour in the fat of his leg (arse?)?” (228).

Beckett also alludes to the psychoanalytic dimension of scatology in the novel. Freud spoke of “a universal conviction among children, who long retain the cloaca theory, that babies are born from the bowel like a piece of faeces” (125). Molloy holds this theory—“to speak . . . of her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct” (20)—and frequently associates his mother with excrement, calling her the “Countess Caca,” and noting that he “piss[es] and shit[s] in her pot” (8). There are numerous references to Freud in the text, both explicit and oblique, and Beckett may allude to Freud’s theory in the second section when Moran invokes the image of the labyrinth (144).

The labyrinth is undoubtedly among the most polysemous of symbols but is often associated with both the brain (as Moran seems to do) and the bowels. Many artists around the Surrealist movement, steeped in Freud and in mythology, were fond of both associations. Freud makes the latter connection: “I cannot resist pointing out how often light is thrown by the interpretation of dreams on mythological themes in particular. Thus, for instance, the legend of the labyrinth can be recognized as a representation of anal birth: the twisting paths are the bowels and Ariadne’s thread is the umbilical cord” (31). Jung extended Freud’s theory somewhat, noting that children create a “theory of propagation” with defecation (211).

He recounts the story of a young patient who would spend inordinate amounts of time on the toilet. When her father asked what she was “doing” in there, she replied, “a little wagon and two ponies” (212).

In another association of creativity and scatology, Molloy sums up human society as “so many citizens, dreaming and farting” (14). Kant would surely have appreciated the image. Satirizing priests, and paraphrasing *Hudibras*, he wrote: “whenever a hypochondriacal wind blows in the guts, it is a question of which direction it takes: if it goes downwards, it comes out a fart; but if it goes upwards, it is an apparition or sacred inspiration” (qtd. in Fenves 97). But there may be Freudian allusions here as well. Molloy makes the observation as a man, A or C (he is not sure), is approaching. He is smoking a cigar (a detail perhaps too obvious). But also he is followed by a Pomeranian—a detail which has possible connections to Freud and psychoanalysis. Pomeranians, or “Spitz dogs,” play a significant role in Freud’s analysis of the Wolf Man, and Wilhelm Fleis, Freud’s friend and collaborator, came from the region of Pomerania. Yet another source for the dog is the fact that Beckett’s mother had a Pomeranian (Baire 337). This may be the most likely explanation, but it is still, in its way, a Freudian one.

EXCREMENT AND RELIGION

The perennial intermingling of scatology and religion is so extensive that cataloging it could fill volumes. The conjoining of excrement and divinity may bring about cognitive dissonance in some, or even most, but for many throughout history it has been a harmony that leaps immediately to mind, though to various ends. On the one hand, the persistence of scatology in religious traditions comes as no surprise, given the ancient roles played by excrement in mythology and the creative/generative association in the psyche. Bakhtin stresses that the image of defecation is “linked to the generating force and to fertility” (175). On the other hand, the ultimate “baseness” of shit makes it an unsurpassed tool for satire, of which religion is so often a target. Either way—by elevating base materiality through myth, psychology, alchemy (urine and excrement were common materials for medieval alchemists), or art, or by bringing down religion and theology by the same means—low and high are joined to come full-circle. Beckett’s scatology in *Molloy* travels in both directions.

Moran, perhaps because he has absolutely no sense of shame regarding the lower bodily stratum, does not include it in his list of questions, but defecation has long posed theological conundrums. Jacob Grimm came across a troubling intersection of scatology and theology in his work on historical linguistics. If God speaks a language, he must have teeth, and since teeth were designed not for speaking but eating, then God must eat, and if God eats. . . . Grimm thought it best not to carry his thought to its blasphemous yet logical conclusion (recounted in Staal). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes that he came upon the same problem as a child and concludes: “Either/or: either man was created in God’s image—and God has intestines!—or God lacks intestines and man

is not like Him.” It is a debate, he notes, that has gone on since the Early Church: “the great Gnostic master Valentinus resolved the damnable dilemma by claiming that Jesus “ate and drank, but did not defecate” (245–246).

A related issue (we might call it the inverse) comes up in Moran’s anxieties about communion. His concern is whether or not the Eucharist would “produce the same effect, taken on top of beer, however light” (132). Moran’s religion is regimental—“I who never missed mass” (129)—which fits his portrayal at the beginning of his narrative as an authoritarian figure. He claims to despise superficial religiosity, as we see in his response to Gaber’s dress: “this gross external observance, while the soul exults in its rags, has always appeared to me an abomination” (127), but he clearly has a literalist, material interpretation of the Eucharist: “The host, it is only fair to say, was lying heavy on my stomach. And as I made my way home I felt like one who, having swallowed a pain-killer, is first astonished, then indignant, on obtaining no relief” (139).

The physical nature of the Eucharist and its fate in the digestive system was, in fact, a topic of fierce debate going back at least to the tenth century. Those who believed that the body of Christ was digested came to be known as *stercoranists*, and the doctrine became a point of heated contention especially after the Reformation. Milton found the idea particularly repulsive:

The Mass brings down Christ’s holy body from its supreme exaltation at the right hand of God. It drags it back to the earth, though it has suffered every pain and hardship already, to a state of humiliation even more wretched and degrading than before: to be broken once more and crushed to the ground, even by the fangs of brutes. Then, when it has been driven through all the stomach’s filthy channels, it shoots it out—one shudders even to mention it—into the latrine. (1290)

The name of the priest who “dispatches” Moran is significant here, as it was Ambrose who first declared unequivocally that the Eucharist is not a symbol, that the bread and wine *literally* become the flesh and blood of Christ (Cummings 66–70; Ramsey 51). He also emphasized that it was the Eucharistic words which brought about this physical transformation—a doctrine that Beckett parodies as “the magic words” (139).

Christianity and theism in general are the target of satire in *Molloy*, but Catholicism is singled out for particular ridicule, as we see in the case of the Eucharist. Another particularly funny (or offensive, depending on the reader) instance is the treatment in the text of the Virgin Mary. The geography that Moran travels is like Bakhtin’s material bodily lower stratum mapped onto the landscape: “Condom on the Baise,” “Hole,”⁷ “Turdy.” Beckett then makes the leap to scatological religious satire when Moran tells the farmer that he is on a pilgrimage to the “Turdy Madonna” (237).⁸ This need not necessarily be read as degrading. For Bakhtin, after all, excrement is “gay matter.” On another level, what we have in the Turdy Madonna is Molloy’s Oedipal/scatological associations with his mother transferred onto the mother of God. Martin Luther, notorious for his scatological discourse, did not always associate excrement with evil—he

claimed to have been visited by the Holy Spirit for the first time while on the toilet. Most often, however, he reserves his scatological language for attacking his adversaries, primarily the Devil and the Pope.⁹ One of his imaginary dialogues with the Pope runs:

POPE: Silence, you heretic! What comes out of your mouth must be kept!

LUTHER: I hear it—which mouth do you mean? The one from which the farts come? (You can keep that yourself!) Or the one into which the good Corsican wine flows? (Let a dog shit into that!)

POPE: Oh, you abominable Luther; should you talk to the pope like this?”

LUTHER: Shame on you too, you blasphemous, desperate rogues and crude asses. . . . You are a crude ass, you ass-pope, and an ass you will remain. (281)

That excrement is such an effective satirical tool against the Church is in large part due to the centuries of effort on the Church’s part to link human waste with sin, punishment, Hell, and the Devil. In the Old Testament, “dung” is mentioned most often in pragmatic contexts—sanitary prohibitions and recommendations, use as fertilizer and fuel, etc.—though there are also some punitive associations, such as in Job. The New Testament does not mention dung much at all, but when it does, it is for a symbol of what is low and worthless. Beginning with the early Church Fathers, however, there is an aggressive campaign to link anything deemed vile with excrement, and for many, this meant nearly everything outside of Heaven. A dictum attributed to Augustine (and often quoted by Freud) says that man is *inter faeces et urinam nascimur*, and Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that “man is nothing but stinking sperm, a sack of excrement and food for worms” (qtd. in Camporesi 78).

The literature behind the scatological figuration of Hell is enormous, but we need look no further than Dante, in whose eighth circle flatterers are condemned to live in a river of shit, and farting devils are to be found all around. Or, for a more recent version, consider the sermon that frightens Stephen Dedalus into servility in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The heightened emotive content of excrement, then, is the Church’s own doing, and it is no surprise to see it thrown back in its own face so often. Chaucer was a master of such satire. In the *Summoner’s Tale*, he first ridicules mendicant friars by having a sick man, instead of giving alms, deliver a fart into a friar’s hand; then scholastic logic by having the friars work out how to divide the fart evenly among them; and lastly the Godhead itself in the solution, which equates the Holy Spirit with flatulence. Bakhtin observes that “not a single saying of the Old and New Testaments was left unchallenged as long as it could provide some hint of equivocal suggestion that could be travestied and transposed into the language of the material bodily lower stratum” (86).

Scatological satire of the church came from both within and without, and Beckett’s, like Joyce’s, is definitely from without. Molloy is anti-theistic from the beginning, noting that anthropology interests him in “its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God” (52). Moran’s faith, as we have

noted, is rather hollow from the beginning, but he comes to reject it completely in the course of his narrative: “as for God, he is beginning to disgust me” (144); “there are men and there are things, to hell with animals. And with God” (227); “Our Father who art no more in heaven than on earth or in hell, I neither want nor desire that thy name be hallowed” (229). Beckett does employ scatological humor in his jibes at religion; the “Turdy Madonna” is the most acute example, but there is also Molloy’s interjection of “Jesus-Christ” when he has his finger in his rectum (107). Moran’s comment, “the seat of my breeches, before it too decomposed, sawed my crack from Dan to Beersheba” (243) again overlays the lower bodily stratum on geography, in this case the geography of the Holy Land. And another juxtaposition: “I was not going to expose myself to thunderbolts which might be fatal, simply because my son had the gripes. . . . It was not for nothing I had studied the old testament. Have you shat, my child, I said gently” (162). But the scatology in Molloy goes beyond bringing down religion and dragging it through the filth.

EXCREMENT AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Let us return one last time to the scene with the policeman and the papers. The policeman asks for Molloy’s identification, and what he gets is an identification of sorts—of a living human. Or at least a living animal. We have here an entry into the existential nature of scatological writing, for excrement is the great leveler, both among humans and of humans—recall Molloy’s description of the blind alley “littered with miscellaneous rubbish and with excrements, of dogs and masters” (81). Are we more than “eating and shitting machines”? Such is the simplistic caricature of many a biologically informed examination of man. It suggests that much of the sentiment behind the taboo, shame, disgust, and evasion of excrement is rooted in a certain existential anxiety or an unwillingness to confront questions of human identity, man’s place in nature, and the nature of the world. Kundera summarizes this nicely:

The fact that until recently the word “shit” appeared in print as s--- has nothing to do with moral considerations. You can’t claim shit is immoral, after all! The objection to shit is a metaphysical one. The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don’t lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner. (248)

Many have theorized that, to the human psyche, civilization itself is built on the principle of managing human waste. Freud is the obvious authority on this idea, but perhaps Joyce expresses it best in *Ulysses*:

—What was their civilisation? Vast, I allow: but vile. Cloacae: sewers. The Jews in the wilderness and on the mountaintop said: *It is meet to be here. Let us build an altar to Jehova*. The Roman, like the Englishman who follows in his footsteps, brought to every new shore on which he set his foot (on our shore he never set it) only his

cloacal obsession. He gazed about him in his toga and said: *It is meet to be here. Let us construct a watercloset.* (126)

To the civilized mind, excrement represents disorder, chaos, and is a pungent daily reminder that although technology allows us some degree of self-determination regarding man's place in nature, we have no say over nature's place in us. William G. Plank, drawing on the dramaturgical sociology of Erving Goffman, writes that "scatological humor removes the props by which the self attempts to create and control its image: clothing, privacy, secrecy, composition of the face, and self-control. There is a general debasement of the human individual and at the same time an exaltation of the basic organic existence of the self" (n.p.).

Plank also makes a passing suggestion that the "psycho-social bases of scatological humor" can be related to Sartre's concepts of the *en-soi*, or being-in-itself, and *pour-soi*, or being-for-itself. Beckett and Sartre had a collegial but distant relationship; in her biography, Dierdre Bair writes that Beckett "studied Sartre from afar" (352). There are many points of similarity between the two, however. The meditations on objects in *Molloy*, for example, are reminiscent of Sartre's discussion of the *en-soi*—the class of things (rocks, plants, artifacts) that are not conscious of their own existence. Molloy, who spends a lot of time handling and looking at objects, such as the unidentifiable knife-holder, philosophizes that "to restore silence is the role of objects" (16). Moran, complementing the idea, praises those who can "be silent and listen" and who can "detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made" (166).

Beckett was not a self-identified "existentialist," but the term is apt for many of his works. It almost goes without saying that *Molloy* is pervaded by issues of identity, existence, and essence, and the pervasive excrement has a significant relation to this existentialist key, just as it did to existentialism proper. A French journal once commented that people should stop using the term "existentialism" and call it "excrementalism," and Raymond Las Vergnas, lector of the universities of Paris, wrote that Sartre's work was like "pathways deep in shit on which it is best to venture equipped with stilts" (Lévy 34). Sartre was constantly accused of coprophilia but defended himself eloquently:

the reason why we must speak of even the most humble functions of the body is that we must not pretend to have forgotten that the spirit descends into the body, or in other words the psychological into the physiological. . . . I don't speak about these things for my amusement but because in my view a writer ought to grasp man whole. (258)

Bakhtin wrote that "dung is a link between body and earth (the laughter that unites them), [and] urine is a link between body and sea" (335). Similarly (to improve on Plank's idea), we might conceive of excrement as *mediating* between the *en-soi* and *pour-soi*. Given its position—central, fundamental, mediatory—it is all but inevitable that excrement will figure in existential discourse or discussion of the human condition. And, given the persistent ambiguity of excrement, the tone

of such discourse can vary, ranging from pessimism to optimism, denial to acceptance. We have already seen the Christian version of this—*inter faeces et urinam*. In one of his darker moods, Martin Luther remarked, “I am like ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic ass-hole. We probably will let go of each other soon” (qtd. in Erikson 206). The sentiment is echoed by Moran—“this image hardly fitted my situation, which was rather that of the turd waiting for the flush” (223)—as well as Molloy—“fate had earmarked me for less compassionate sewers” (23).

Ultimately, scatological art makes us face excrement, and in facing excrement we face a dilemma: we find it disgusting, yet we produce it—we are the source of our own disgust. What are we to do? One option is to laugh. Molloy’s presentation of his used toilet paper as identification and his observation of human and dog excrement intermixed remind us of our natural condition. But, as Father Ambrose points out, there is another condition which defines man—the ability to laugh. We could do worse than to bring the two together.

Notes

1. Jeanne-Sarah de Larquier makes the astute observation that Beckett also implicitly compares writing to masturbation in his euphemism “twixt finger and thumb,” which is where one would expect to find a pen (de Larquier 53).
2. A possible exception is Norwegian, whose pitch accent could be considered as a form of tone.
3. Moran does as well and makes several remarks to this effect. One interesting suggestion is when he claims that he had “lived like a Hottentot” (166). Moran presumably means that he lived in poverty, but Beckett likely had an added meaning in mind, given that the most common etymology for the term is that it derives from a Dutch word meaning “stutter, stammer,” applied to the Khoekhoe people because of their language, which, with its clicks, sounded strange to the colonial invaders. This linguistic chauvinism is a common phenomenon in world languages: the word *barbarian* (and *berber*, whence it comes) may also have the same etymology in Greek (“blather, stammer”), and the Slavic word for German, *němec*, means “mute”; the *Slavs*, conversely, are the “people who have language”—*Slav* comes from *slovo*, “word.”
4. The precise nature of communication in bees was discovered in 1945 by the Austrian ethologist Karl von Frisch, whose work Beckett seems to have been somewhat familiar with, as many of the details of Moran’s “discovery” match that of von Frisch. Other details seem to be of Beckett’s own imagining.
5. I take the phrase from Kelly Anspaugh, who notes that even John C. Bourke found it necessary to include such an apology in his *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* (1891), an early ethnological examination of excrement and culture that had interested Sigmund Freud in 1913. Bourke’s *apologia* is, of course, meant to be taken as sincere, unlike the usual literary versions, though many, including Stephen Greenblatt, have speculated as to the sincerity of his protests of disgust (Anspaugh 2–3). Another classic example of the mock apology is found in Chaucer’s Prologue to the *Miller’s Tale*, where he says that as a truthful recorder of events, he “moot reherce” the material and recommends the squeamish reader to “Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (3174, 3177).
6. Bourke catalogs several such myths in his aforementioned work (266–72). See also Lévi-Strauss (86–107, 118–177).
7. In fact, Rabelais mentions “St. Patrick’s Hole,” which according to Irish legend was a gateway to Hell, and other similar “Holes” in the geography of Europe, which, Bakhtin notes, had “indecent overtones” already in the Middle Ages (377).

8. Precisely this juxtaposition became the source of a highly publicized controversy in 1999, when the Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibited a painting by British artist Chris Ofili called *The Holy Virgin Mary*, a portrait of Mary which included cutouts of pornographic images and pieces of elephant dung affixed to the canvas. Outraged Mayor Rudy Giuliani withheld city government funding and attempted to have the museum evicted from the building which it leases from the city until a court order from a US District Court judge ruled in favor of the museum, and all legal actions were dropped. Ten years earlier, a similar scandal surrounded Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine.

9. In one such dispute, Thomas More lashed back at Luther and did not hesitate to answer in kind: "But meanwhile, for as long as your reverend paternity will be determined to tell these shameless lies, others will be permitted, on behalf of his English majesty, to throw back into your paternity's shitty mouth, truly the shit-pool of all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up. . . ." This, of course, was followed with an *apologia*: "In your sense of fairness, honest reader, you will forgive me that the utterly filthy words of this scoundrel have forced me to answer such things, for which I should have begged your leave. Now I consider truer than truth that saying: 'He who touches pitch will be wholly defiled by it' (Sirach 13:1). For I am ashamed even of this necessity, that while I clean out the fellow's shit-filled mouth I see my own fingers covered with shit" (311).

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