Who Hobbles after the Subject: Parables of Writing in *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*

Yael Levin

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Negotiations of the modern subject by poststructuralist and disability studies call attention to a complementary shift that has not yet received due critical attention. The forfeiting of the conceit of agency and autonomy that define the Cartesian cogito results in the radical reconfiguration of the creative act. The disabled protagonists of Samuel Beckett's Molloy *and Flann O'Brien's* The Third Policeman *dramatize a writing that is not the product of creative agency but is contingent, dependent, and in flux. The subject's relation to the act of writing is one of participation rather than control. Lennard J. Davis's concept of the "dismodernist subject" viewed alongside a discourse of supplementarity and exhaustion sheds light on the two authors' disparate treatments of disability and its relation to writing.*

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From peg legs to prosthetics, meniscus tears to arthritis, the experimental fiction of the twentieth-century is rife with slow men. The twentieth century evolution of the male protagonist from able to disabled is illustrated in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. These fictional explorations of subjectivity resist the definitive coordinates of their Enlightenment antecedents and can be read as the metonymical expressions of the theoretical debate on the death of the subject. In "The End of Identity Politics," Lennard J. Davis conceptualizes "the dismodernist subject . . . a new category based on the

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Yael Levin (yael.levin@mail.huji.ac.il) is a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University English department. She is author *of Tracing the Aesthetic Principle in Conrad's Novels* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and articles on modernism, postmodernism, narratology and subjectivity in *Partial Answers, Conradiana, The Conradian, Twentieth Century Literature* and a number of edited collections. She is currently working on a second monograph titled *Joseph Conrad 2.0: Slow Modernisms*.

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partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence. This is a very different notion from subjectivity [than that] organized around wounded identities; rather, *all* humans are seen as wounded. … The dismodernist subject is in fact disabled, only completed by technology and by interventions" (313). Such a rethinking of the subject is already in evidence in David Wills's *Prosthesis* where he writes that "the prosthetic body will not be an exception but the paradigm for the body itself" (137).

Davis's notion of the dismodernist subject is enlisted here in order to illuminate a conceptual offshoot of such a renegotiation of subjectivity that has received little attention. Rethinking the defining coordinates of the subject beyond autonomy and control demands that we make a respective shift in our understanding of the formation of creative agency. As will be demonstrated below, an Enlightenment ethos sees the creative act as a product of an autonomous mind housed in a "normate" body.[1] Davis's project of reconfiguring human agency is resistant to such formulations. He defines the dismodernist subject primarily through dependency and incompleteness. Drawn from disability studies, Davis's reformulation finds an interesting bioscientific correlate in Margrit Shildrick's "Re-imagining Embodiment: Prostheses, Supplements and Boundaries." Shildrick here approaches similar questions on the philosophical evolution of subjectivity from within the interpretative frame of somatechnics. She suggests that recent work in immunology, transplantation and genetics "may facilitate a new understanding of corporeal hybridity and a recognition that borders are permeable, and subject to startling changes" and a rethinking of "the whole nexus in terms of neither self/other nor intercorporeality, but rather of assemblages" (282).

Traditional explorations of physical impairment have figuratively signaled the breakdown of creative agency and the failure of artistic inspiration; an author struggles to conclude or promote the plot when his or her protagonist is resistant to forward movement. Such figurative treatments of disability perpetuate the Enlightenment model of creative agency wherein artistic expression is housed in the normate body and impairment spells an attending failure of expression. Beckett's *Molloy* and O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* repeatedly undermine such self-reflexive signposts. The manner in which they do so evinces two things about the authors' views on writing and text. First, the disabled subject is no longer a figure for blocked writing, but rather the site for the proliferation of language. Unmoored from the Enlightenment model of agency and control, writing is refashioned as an interminable project whose driving force is always outside the subject or in excess of subjectivity. Second, as the site for textual production, the protagonist's impairment functions as the figurative key to his maker's poetics. The method whereby Beckett and O'Brien stage their narrators' disability is illustrative not only of their views on writing, but also of the divide evident in their respective reflections on the craft. As such, the two authors may be seen as preserving the metaphorization of disability, a literary abuse that is challenged by a certain strand of disability studies scholarship. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder formulate the objection to such stylized treatments of

disability: "The study of disability must understand the impact of the experience of disability upon subjectivity *without simultaneously situating the internal and external body within a strict mirroring relationship to one another*" (58).

I will engage with the two novels' figurative treatments of impairment not in order to essentialize disability, but rather to show how such reconfigurations of the creative act necessarily attend any rethinking of subjectivity. Davis has suggested that a "solution to the postmodernist quandary presented by power, with its decentered, deracinated notion of action, along with the neorationalist denial of universals" entails "a temporary, contingent way of thinking about agency and change." *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*, I argue, offer literary platforms for this kind of approach—an approach that registers a shift from the modern/disabled subject to the dismodern subject. Thus my readings are not limited to the specific case histories of protagonists or to the experiences of disability conveyed in the novels, but extend also to the conditions of possibility for dismodernism. Following Davis, mine is a project that is not exclusive to disability but rather pursues "a clear notion of expanding the protected class to the entire population; a commitment to removing barriers and creating access for all." Davis asks us to move "beyond the fixity of the body to a literally constructed body, which can then be reconstructed with all the above goals in mind" (314); I propose that O'Brien and Beckett have already begun this work.

Molloy seems, at first, to conform to traditional significations of the slow protagonist: the inability to write and move are drawn in parallel; Beckett's writing-wandering heroes appear to function as the quintessential markers of writer's block. This literary commonplace is nevertheless challenged by the repeated conflation of writing with passivity and paralysis. The Unnamable famously announces: "It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee" (*Three Novels* 301). *The Third Policeman* resists the collapsing of artistic and physical impairment in a very different manner. O'Brien's hero may have a prosthetic leg, yet he is anything but slow. Where movement in Beckett is belabored, forced, painful, and ineffectual, *The Third Policeman*'s disabled men suffer no such limitations. The prostheses encountered in the course of the novel signal movement and continuity. Beckett explores a writing that issues from inertia; O'Brien's vision of writing is an assemblage, a piecing together of multiple parts. His protagonist is as much a collation of bits and pieces as the de Selby Index he has written, which intrudes into his narrative in the form of discordant footnotes. Writing in the novel, in other words, follows a logic of prosthetic attachment.

The explorations of disability introduced in the two novels thus follow the figurative expressions of two distinct models of textual production. Where Gilles Deleuze's concept of Exhaustion is helpful in testing the ontological implications of a writing associated with stasis, Jacques Derrida's reflections on supplementarity allows for the unpacking of the metafictional significances of a prosthesis that spells perpetual movement. Though the two paradigms outlined here pertain to contradictory figurations of writing-the first issuing from paralysis and the second from movement, the first lodged in an accumulative verticality and the second a

metonymical regression—both arise from an attempt to rethink writing beyond the coordinates of a unified, independent subjectivity and its symbolic expression in the normate body. Shildrick links the two thinkers through their negotiation of prostheses and the "potentially celebratory re-imagining of the multiple possibilities of corporeal extensiveness" (271). While she views Derrida as providing "a useful route out of humanist nostalgia," she concludes that Deleuze's notion of assemblage will provide "new opportunities to further explore our ongoing fascination with the nature of the body" wherein there is "no useful distinction" to be made between the human body as organic and technological assemblage (Shildrick 282). Such a distinction will be tested against the emerging relation between these newly envisioned subjects and the writing act.

If the two models of writing are suggestive of an essential difference, existing comparative analyses of O'Brien's and Beckett's works offer a method of reading the two authors together. Keith Hopper notes Anti-Cartesianism as the principle that sets the two writers against the modernist tradition and serves as "a springboard for an entirely new direction in Irish (and European) literature" (227). In keeping with Hopper's astute observation, I would suggest we further negotiate these authors' postmodernist poetics by tracing the very expression of the breakdown of Enlightenment subjectivity in the symbolic resonances of physical impairment. The disabled subjects explored in the two texts are significant in their insinuation of alternative models of textual production. By tracing the evolution of such writing subjects, we uncover a hitherto uncharted link between the authors' poetics and the manner in which they literally deconstruct their writer-narrators. That language exceeds subjectivity has been made clear by twentieth-century theories ranging from Saussure's linguistics to Lacan's psychoanalysis. *Molloy* and *The Third Policeman* bring this realization to bear on the ensuing displacement of the writing act. Our focus here will be this attempt to relocate, reshape, and rethink the writing subject.

SLOW MEN AND THE LITERARY TRADITION

Literature does not like its slow men. In her essay on artificial legs, Vanessa Warne quotes an amputee who issues a protest against the literary mistreatment of his unique social group. "Our station in literature is unhappy," he writes, noting that "the magnates of literature went out of their way to fling stones at the ideal wooden-legged man" (qtd. in Warne 362). Warne lends support to this view in stating that "Dickens's portraits of wooden-legged characters, most famously *Our Mutual Friend's* peg leg-wearing Silas Wegg, repeatedly associate prostheses with ignorance, intemperance, and greed" (32). Nicole Marotic has similarly argued that "a character presented as 'less' than able is not only a moral marker of social ill but is also a physical embodiment of cultural blunders" (179). Marotic traces Flannery O'Connor's suggestion that "a physical 'flaw' or 'defection' necessarily announce a corresponding moral 'defect'" (184) back to an Enlightenment cliché wherein "the 'nobility and 'gentlefolk' have a moral duty to remain healthy" (182).

Mitchell and Snyder conclude that "Literature serves up disability as a repressed deviation from cultural imperatives of normativity, while disabled populations suffer the consequences of representational association with deviance and recalcitrant corporeal difference" (8).

If the social, economic, and moral implications of a semiotics of physical impairment are merciless, its metaliterary significances offer no compassion either. This is true, moreover, of any form of stunted movement, beyond its physically determined expressions. *The Divine Comedy* begins with its protagonist lost in a dark wood, his path blocked by the terrifying vision of a spotted leopard. The hero's inability to go forward functions literally as an obstacle to be overcome in the action, and figuratively as his soul's languishing in a state of sin. More pertinently for my reading is this scene's signaling of the paralyzing loss of poetic inspiration. It is not only the pilgrim but also the poet who cannot move forward. But where Dante will finally put foot before foot on his way to divine revelation, the heroes that follow centuries later lose their footing altogether and linger in these dark woods. The modern author, in turn, continues to be troubled by the blank pages that attend his characters' resistance to forward movement.

While this foundational text is important for mapping out the symbolic connection between forward movement and artistic inspiration, it does not provide an adequate introduction to the corresponding figurations of a physically disabled hero. A case in point, J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* offers a helpful presentation of the self-reflexive potential of such a character. The narrative begins with a traffic accident that results in the amputation of the protagonist's leg. The story, however, is more than an account of his rehabilitation and return to life; it is also a metafictional inquiry into what a writer might do with such a character. The protagonist's view on this is very clear. Turning to Elizabeth Costello, the (fictionalized) author supposedly writing his life story, he begs her to give him up. "I am not an amenable subject" (Coetzee 89), he protests. Costello agrees he could do better:

> "Think how well you started. What could be better calculated to engage one's attention than the incident on Magill Road, where young Wayne collided with you and sent you flying through the air *like a cat*. What a sad decline ever since! Slower and slower, till by now you are almost at a halt, trapped in a stuffy flat with a caretaker who could not care less about you." (100)

Costello's role in the story is reportedly to keep this "man with the bad leg" (89) on an appropriate narrative trajectory. "Most of the time," she tells him, "you won't notice I am here. Just a touch on the shoulder, now and then, left or right, to keep you on the path" (87).

Costello's words highlight the literal and figurative anxieties of a writer dealing with a disabled subject. A hero who comes to a halt interrupts narrative progression and brings his story to its premature end. Much like the start of *The Divine Comedy,* the threat of cessation here also doubles as the loss of creative inspiration; a character who cannot move forward in the story provides an apt figure for the writer blocked before a blank page.

At the outset of *The Third Policeman*, we encounter a hero-narrator who squares neatly with this paradigm. The narrator notes his reluctance to leave the house, as his wooden leg is "not very good for walking with" (12). Though this exposition appears to marry physical impairment—in this case, a prosthetic leg—with stunted movement, such a signification is soon undermined. M. Keith Booker remarks the challenging of the narrator's account of his limitation in the scene depicting the murder of Mathers where he exhibits both speed and agility.

The prosthesis similarly exceeds its traditional significance in the exploits of the army of one-legged men, the so-called "hoppy lads" (165) and their captain Finnucane. Much like the protagonist, these men are immune to the limitations dictated by their impairment and, in a "masterpiece of military technocratics" (164), come marching to his rescue. The "hoppy lads"' offensive against the police barracks points to the symbolic value of O'Brien's refigured prosthesis, which becomes the engine of an invading force, rather than a sign of physical incapacity.

Like bicycles, the road, and other inanimate objects become animate through the workings of the novel's atomic theory, the wooden leg functions as a live prosthesis that gradually takes over its host. In his cell at night, the protagonist notes a sensation wherein his leg is "spreading," "its woodenness" "slowly extending throughout my whole body, a dry timber poison killing me inch by inch." He senses that "soon my brain would be changed to wood completely and I would then be dead" (115). Rather than a figure for inertia, limitation, or a defect—be it moral, artistic or otherwise—the protagonist's prosthesis is a marker of his fragmentation, an incompleteness that is constantly in danger of being permeated and taken over. The prosthesis does not make him a complete subject so much as encroach on his freedom, rendering him dependent on this invading other.[2]

The anxiety associated with the experience of an artificially attached limb is powerfully illustrated in "The Cork Leg," one of the entries in a nineteenth-century compilation of Modern Street Ballads. The song describes the horrifying misadventures of a wealthy Dutch merchant who loses his leg as he turns away a destitute relation by literally kicking him out the door. The offender compensates himself for his injury by commissioning a "beautiful leg of cork" from a celebrated artist in Rotterdam. The limb, however, does not function quite as expected:

> He walked through squares, and past each shop,
> Of speed he went to the utmost top,
> Each step he took with a bound and a hop,
> And he found his leg he could not stop.
> Horror and fright were in his face,
> The neighbours thought he was running a race;
> He clung to a gas-post to stay his pace,
> But the leg wouldn't stop, but kept on the chace [sic]. ("Cork Leg" 154)

Though he repeatedly calls for help, throws himself to the ground and hangs onto lampposts and trees passed on the way, the battle with the demonic limb is finally lost:

> He walk'd of days and nights a score,
> Of Europe he had made the Tour,
> He died!—but though he was no more,
> The leg walked on the same as before. (154)

The narrator concludes the ballad with the following words:

> My tale I've told both plain and free,
> Of the rummest merchant that ever could be,
> Who never was buried, tho' dead we see,
> And I've been singing his L E G. (155)[3]

The ballad serendipitously anticipates O'Brien's tale of a dead man walking on and on in the circular infinity of his very own hell-dimension. In doing so, it once again highlights the fragmentation of the hero and the manner in which his incompleteness invites a powerful addendum that constantly threatens to invade its host. This shared plot design, I argue, is precisely what will allow us to map the thematic coordinates of the novel's metafictional significations.

In *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post/Modernist,* Hopper argues that "Noman [Hopper's name for the unnamed protagonist]'s existential struggle is that of a metafictional character who wishes to transcend his condition—seeks the power (omnium) to create his own world where he shall reign as author-god" (102). Noman's difficulty, he continues, is that "he still sees himself as an author and not a character, a creator, and not a creation" (107). Hopper's diagnosis relies on the stable and mutually-exclusive coherence of the categories of author and character, subject of the creative act and its pawn or object. Such a reading is premised not only on the abiding existence of ontologically separate narrative levels or worlds, but also on the very concept of authorship as the activity of a singular subjectivity that is both independent and creative. The following analysis seeks to uncover a model of writing that eschews such definitions.

The ballad and the novel both describe an incomplete subject, one that lacks the coherence and control of a Cartesian *cogito.* At the same time, he is neither the object of another's act of creation nor the pawn of another's artistic agency. The disabled subject acts and is acted upon, is both the author and instrument of his adventures. The prosthesis is both other and an extension of himself, a focal point of liminality that allows him to live on, walk on into death. Read side-by-side with the ballad, then, we might see O'Brien's hero not as exhibiting the metaleptic confusion of a character who stubbornly adheres to the belief that he is author of the strange and inhospitable world in which he finds himself or a character who refuses to accept his ontological fictionality, but as a figure for textuality. To view the unfolding of his character as a parable of textual production rather than a parable of Being calls for a reinterpretation of Noman's adventure as the symbolic unfolding of a method of writing that exceeds subjectivity. In order to unpack such a network of figurations I will follow the protagonist's lead and turn to the aid of de Selby.

Noman's initial encounter with the philosopher's work is with an incomplete volume. "The book," he reports, "was a first edition of *Golden Hours* with the two last pages missing" (O'Brien 9). Much like this protagonist's physical lack, the ur-text around which his life evolves is incomplete. And much like the Rotterdam artist who fashions the artificial limb for the wealthy Dutch merchant, Noman's project is to complete de Selby's life work by writing the definitive Index "wherein the views of all known commentators on every aspect of the savant and his work [will be] collated," a book "useful … and badly wanted," "containing much that was entirely new and proof that many opinions widely held about de Selby and his theories were misconceptions based on misreadings of his works" (14). The Index, then, is that prosthesis that the philosopher requires to live on past his death. Further contributing to the analogy, Noman's work can survive only by leeching onto the life force of his idol. As he announces at the start, should his name be remembered, "it would be remembered with de Selby's" (10).

This mapping of the different writing projects mentioned in the novel is in keeping with the narrator's stated scholarly commitments at the start. The novel unfolds, however, as the inverse of this textual scheme in that the main narrative is devoted not to the philosopher but rather to the narrator's adventures. The protagonist fleetingly references this more autobiographical writing when, staring at what appears to be Mather's ghost, he reflects that it was "hard to write of such a scene or to convey with known words the feelings which came knocking at my numbed mind" (24). It is this implicit writing project, those multiple scenes of confusion and stupefaction at the incidents of his daily life that form the novel's primary narrative. De Selby's philosophy, in turn, assumes the role of supplement, and provides the hermeneutic signposts with which both the protagonist and his readers might deal with his absurd encounters.

The two projects of writing, both the story of Noman's experiences as related in the novel and his commentary on de Selby, unfold side by side. Neither can exist in isolation. And yet, in keeping with the hierarchical structure that distinguishes the primary and secondary narratives, de Selby's contributions are gradually relegated to the margin. From their initial placement within the body of the text they are transformed into footnotes—a prosthesis attached to the story. And while these appear, at first, to honor the restraint and measure accorded to the supplement, they gradually proliferate to the point of hijacking entire pages of the narrator's story. As Hopper notes, "By chapter eight […] a single footnote, spread over the space of four pages, threatens to spiral out of control, and overpower the point it initially set out to develop. The various commentators cited—with Noman acting as 'editor'—gradually begin to attack each other's reputations and the primary text begins to recede …" (155). Joseph Brooker similarly finds that "a text ostensibly meant for secondary clarification has effectively displaced the primary narrative" (126). The prosthesis attached to the text thus takes on a life of its own and drags the story along with it, recalling the drama that unfolds in the ballad.

The mirroring of this unique method of textual production in the fragmentation and dependence of the novel's hero is once again emphasized when Joe, the narrator's soul, issues his threat of abandonment. Forced to attend the fragility of his being, Noman realizes that he is the sum of two corresponding deficiencies—incompleteness and dependence. The threat of the loss of his soul impels him to come to terms with "the complexities not only of my intermediate dependence and my catenal unintegrity but also my dangerous adjunctiveness and my embarrassing unisolation" (O'Brien 119). Articulating a combination of embarrassment and vulnerability, his insight appears to shuttle between the ontological threat of dissolution and the social impropriety of his apparent reliance. He is neither whole nor independent; he must continually attend and be attended by that which might complete him.

Such a model of "unintegrity" is similarly implicit in the desire that fuels Noman's life's work, his attempt to complete the lack first encountered in the missing pages of de Selby's book. Noman's Index is designed as the perfect addendum to the philosopher's *oeuvre.* By bringing together all the existing commentaries, interpretations, biographical notes, and other paratextual evidence linked with the philosopher's life and works, Noman hopes to explain away the gaps and contradictions detracting from the wholeness of the original. And much as Noman himself can never be complete, his commentary on de Selby's life and works proliferates with no end in sight. Remarking on this slippage, Booker writes that Hatchjaw, Bassett, and their fellow scholars not only "fail to reach conclusions but … generate additional work by metacommentators (like Henderson, author of *Hatchjaw and Bassett*) whose work is similarly inconclusive" (53). Booker further associates this interminable process of textual production with "the many manifestations of similar phenomena of Nietzschean infinite regression to be found scattered throughout O'Brien's work" (53). While the implications noted here are epistemological, we might similarly attribute such regression to Noman's ontological reflections and their symbolic resonances in the perpetually generative nature of a text made to bring closure to an incomplete antecedent.

If the proliferation of textual production in *The Third Policeman* finds its symbolic expression in a prosthesis that sustains the *perpetuum mobile* of its host, such is not the case in Beckett's *Molloy.* Commenting on the distinctions evident in the treatment of physical impairment in the two Irish novels, Maciej Ruczaj notes that as opposed to Noman's agility, "Beckett's heroes are presented as really physically handicapped"; "their bodies," he adds, "are in a state of constant decomposition" (Ruczaj 97). Faced with the very challenge with which O'Brien tasks his own protagonist—the digging of his victim's grave—Molloy fails where his one-legged counterpart is successful. He muses that "my sick leg […] was in a condition neither to dig, because it was rigid, nor alone to support me because it would have collapsed." His distress is so great, in fact, that he expresses regret that he is not one-legged, noting he "would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin" (*Three Novels* 35). The metafictional implications of such envy and the

manner in which they allow us to distinguish the conceptualizations of writing in the two novels, are traced below.

Molloy opens with a picture of disability. Finding himself in his mother's room, the eponymous narrator wonders how he got there: "Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone" (7). Without external help, Molloy's movements pose something of a challenge. Describing how he set off to find his mother, he recounts how his progress was

> slow and painful at all times, was more so than ever, because of my short stiff leg, the same which I thought had long been as stiff as a leg could be, but damn the bit of it, for it was growing stiffer than ever, a thing I would not have thought possible and at the same time shorter every day, but above all because of the other leg, supple hitherto and now growing rapidly stiffer in turn but not yet shortening, unhappily. For when the two legs shorten at the same time, at and the same speed, then all is not lost, no. But when one shortens, and the other not, then you begin to be worried. (76–77)

Such disability, moreover, is quickly tied to a life of writing, conceived here as an obligation impressed upon him by a man "who comes every week" offering money and taking pages in return. In what first appears to be the recycling of a familiar literary topos, writing is as laborious for Molloy as is physical movement. His ability to produce text is drawn in parallel with his immobility. Bodily decay spells the death of inspiration. Not only has he "forgotten how to spell," he's also missing "half the words" (7). The trouble is compounded when he realizes that the character to which he devoted the first part of his narrative is escaping. Molloy muses: "To get up, to get down on the road, to set off hobbling in pursuit of him, to hail him, what could be easier? He hears my cries, turns, waits for me. I am up against him, up against the dog, gasping, between my crutches. . . . What I need now is stories" (12–13). Molloy's metaleptic gesture here testifies to a curious commingling of his physical impairment and the inability to write. The writer in search of inspiration is recreated literally as a disabled subject chasing a story.

The self-same literary topos is in evidence in the second part of the narrative. Before setting on his journey to find Molloy, Moran is accosted by "an acute pain" in the knee (119) which worsens to the point of complete paralysis. His breakdown in a dark wood will not lead to divine inspiration but the decision to give up his quest for Molloy and return home. Here, too, we find that physical impairment and the writing are conflated: "That night I set out for home. I did not get far. But it was a start. It is the first step that counts. The second counts less. Each day saw me advance a little further. That last sentence is not clear, it does not say what I hoped it would" (165). The slippage here is subtle—but the belabored progress associated with physical impairment finds its expressive parallel in the writing itself. The difficulty in negotiating forward momentum occurs on a double axis—his legs and his language are equally treacherous: both betray him. The imagery of snow that follows amplifies this duality. Moran reflects that given his extreme physical decline, anyone else "would have lain down in the snow, firmly

resolved never to rise again" (165). The snow here doubles as physical obstacle and blank page, a difficulty to both writer and traveler. And both are victorious. As he reports. "I vanquished it, grinding my teeth with joy" (165).

Against this model of progression and triumph wherein conquering one's impairments and putting pen to paper are alike symbols of the successful articulation of one's agency and control, testament to a coherent and independent identity, the novel offers a contradictory model of writing. While the Molloy who hobbles after the character starring in his narrative might be likened to Noman's pursuit of de Selby's various truths, Beckett also offers a figure of the writer who, "perched higher than the road's highest point and flattened what is more against a rock" (10) invokes Dante's Belacqua. The correspondence between the figure of the sloth and the physical decay described in the narratives of both Molloy and Moran is no longer suggestive of impairment as a limitation to be overcome, but as the very condition of textual production. The Belacqua we encounter in Dante's *Purgatorio* is associated with indolence, laziness, procrastination. But he is also a figure for the poet. Writing that issues forth from sloth cannot follow the model of an endlessly proliferating addendum after which the writer is dragged along in a circular chase.

The slippage of emphasis from movement in *The Third Policeman* to that of immobility in *Molloy*—a key distinction, as we have noted, in the treatment of physical impairment—signals a parallel shift in the conceptualization of writing. Here, writing is no longer progressive; it no longer assumes the form of an encounter between the disabled subject and the prosthetic supplements that draw him forward in a futile yet ongoing effort towards completion or normalcy. The writing explored here is stationary; it is an accumulative writing that proceeds vertically rather than horizontally. Stretched in complete immobility on a rock, Molloy lists "the cows, the sky, the sea, the mountains," A, C, the rock, and himself—all of which, he claims, arise "from one and the same weariness, on and on heaping up and up, until there is no room, no light, for any more" (14). Such a model of composition recalls Joyce's rubbish heap more than it does O'Brien's models of atomic theory or infinite regression. However, rather than follow Joyce in viewing this as an alternative method of textual production, an alchemy of sorts whereby, as Barbara DiBernard writes, the garbage heap "is transformed into art" (16), Beckett utilizes such a method of writing to stage a return to the blank page.

The Enlightenment model of writing traced earlier—wherein the writer vanquishes that self-same image of the white page—finds its accelerated and transgressive subversion in *Molloy*'s motif of writing as destruction. Composition is likened to "a firm hand weaving inexorably back and forth and devouring my page with the indifference of a shuttle" (*Three Novels* 132–33). This writing method is the product of the suspicion "that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery" (13). Once again, the insistence on obliterating and devouring pages mirrors the physical decay encountered throughout the novel. Much like

the writing described above, the body becomes the site of an accumulation of ailments, pains, and weaknesses. The motifs of writing and disability are brought together in a mutual exploration of a loss of agency whose manifold articulations spell destruction.

A fitting emblem for this alternative trajectory of textual production is offered in the novel's most striking subversion of Romantic poetics. "It is in the tranquillity of decomposition," Molloy notes, "that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life, and that I judge it, as it is said that God will judge me, and with no less impertinence. To decompose is to live too, I know, I know, don't torment me, but one sometimes forgets" (25). The figure of decomposition conflates the physical and the metafictional in mutual ruin. In a reversal of the Enlightenment principles of improvement and progress, life and composition are transgressively associated with death and decay. And once again, as we saw in our reading of *The Third Policeman,* such textual production is not one of agency but of passivity. One is involved in one's physical decay as one writes—but this is not due to a Cartesian subject exerting agency. One falls into writing much as one falls ill. Molloy finds himself before a blank page at the end of a journey to find his mother; Moran similarly ends his narrative before a blank page in order to write a report. The writing act is not the expression of creative independence and control; it is an externally enforced imposition. As Moran repeatedly reminds us, "All is tedious in this relation that is forced upon me" (131). Youdi requires him to write his report; the unnamed agents initially hounding Molloy enforce his work.

We have so far attended to impairment and physical decay as markers of a method of textual production that exceeds the cohesive, independent subjectivity we associate with the Cartesian *cogito.* In *The Birth of the Clinic,* Foucault offers an alternative interpretation in the claim that medical monitoring, specifically clinical negotiations of death and disease, serves as the articulation of individuality. "Death," Foucault writes, "is the great analyst that shows the connexions by unfolding them, and bursts open the wonders of genesis in the rigour of decomposition" (*The Birth* 144). Such a philosophical treatment of disease challenges the distinction between agency and illness, suggesting that from the nineteenth century onwards, the broken or diseased patient assumes the privilege of subjectivity. Foucault writes: "it is in that perception of death that the individual finds himself, escaping from a monotonous, average life; in the slow, half-subterranean, but already visible approach of death, the dull, common life becomes an individuality at last; a black border isolates it and gives it the style of its own truth" (171). Foucault's analysis might be seen as the literalization of Hegel's claim that "The life of the mind begins with death" (qtd. in Blanchot 252). As Blanchot explains: "when death becomes power, then man begins, and this beginning rules that, in order for there to be a world, in order for there to be beings, being must lack" (Blanchot 252).

To reframe the matter of impairment as identity marker allows us to return to the protagonists' descriptions of their respective physical afflictions and their

correspondences with the motif of writing. Molloy's and Moran's obsessive narrations of their physical decline and its minutia of expressions might by seen as an attempt to combat the fluidity of their respective identities and to anchor their individuality by carefully attending to their unique physicality. The narrative pertaining to Noman's impairments—from the description of his accident to the odd sensations linked to his prosthesis—might be seen as a similar effort to chart an individuality to protect it from the loss of memory and identity. Though the writing acts might be devoted to or imposed by others (the de Selby Index and Molloy's and Moran's commissioned writing tasks, for instance), these unique compositions appear transgressively personal.

Foucault's paradigm nevertheless falls short in its application to the two novels when the transgressively personal is repeatedly recuperated with the impersonal; the unique signatures of the protagonists' impairments are mirrored by the characters they encounter. The prosthesis that defines O'Brien's protagonist is constantly echoed in a host of other characters from Martin Finnucane to his band of hoppy lads. This repetition functions as one of the novel's greatest jokes, perhaps most rewarding in the scene where the man building the gallows on which Noman is to hang accidentally drops a hammer on his foot and is insensible to the pain, showing himself to be an additional entry in this ever-expanding group.[4] Similarly, Moran's narrative of decline echoes the experience related in Molloy's account. Aspects of the weaknesses that are so integral to the two characters' identities are then refracted in various others encountered along the way, not least of which is Molloy's "true love." Extending beyond the borders of gender, she too "move[s] with short stiff steps, leaning on an ebony stick" (*Three Novels* 57). Rather than set them apart, the impairments of all three protagonists further establish the fluidity of their identity.[5]

The repetition traced here also plays out in the novels' circular designs. At the end of *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien's protagonist unknowingly falls back onto the very path from which he embarked. Similarly, Moran's narrative opens and ends in one and the same scene: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (92). Booker argues "that so much of the text at the end of *The Third Policeman* is repeated verbatim from earlier in the book serves to signal not only the futility of the narrator's efforts to break out of his confined condition but also to indicate the inability of the writer to produce anything genuinely new" (15). Molloy appears to extend the truth of this observation in his own comment about writing: "And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten" (32). In this recurrence of the self-same to the exclusion of difference we find that once again, textual production and physical impairment are drawn in parallel. Much as the idea of a unique physical marker is unmasked as illusory in its ability to separate the self from the other, the possibility of an original contribution to letters is unmasked as a hoax. Everything has been said already.

That the writer cannot harness his unique identity and his creative agency to say anything new may be attributed to the novel's staging of the demise of a particular conceptualization of writing—one tied to the Enlightenment subject. We have already seen that both novels demonstrate the manner in which text is generated outside the defining coordinates of such an entity. *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy* offer disabled subjects; the models of textual production explored in the two novels overthrow a cohesive, independent creative agency. The representation of disability does not mark the protagonists as unique, but as dependent, subject-object hybrids in the process of becoming. The signifying key in O'Brien's parable of writing, Noman's prosthesis serves as a model of textual production that may be likened to the Derridean Supplement. Like a prosthesis complementing the living body that hosts it, the supplement is artifice—it "adds itself, it is a surplus" (*Of Grammatology* 144) that is "*exterior,* outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it" (145). And much like that demonic limb we encountered in the ballad, that "dangerous supplement destroys very quickly the forces that Nature has slowly constituted and accumulated. In 'out-distancing' natural experience, it runs non-stop *[brûle les étapes*— literally "burns the halting-points"] and consumes energy without possibility of recovery . . . it bypasses the presence of the thing and the duration of being" (151). Those various additions—the run-on commentaries on de Selby and the endless texts they generate—form the new as an accidental by-product of textual accumulation and slippage. Writing in *The Third Poliecman* occurs at the margin; it is not the product of a creative agent but slippage that occurs in the constant tension between the broken subject and the prosthesis that propels him forward.

Beckett's model of writing similarly transgresses traditional models of subjectivity. The key to this transgression, however, differs from O'Brien's, and might be seen to follow the etiology of the protagonists' impairments. Noman's disability is the result of a past accident; Moran and Molloy fall prey to a host of symptoms that gradually accumulate over time. The accidental in the first novel thus gives way to accumulation in the second. Deleuze and Guattari explain that "Molloy and Moran no longer designate persons, but singularities flocking from all sides, evanescent agents of production. This is free disjunction; the differential positions persist in their entirety, they even take on a free quality, but they are all inhabited by a faceless and transpositional subject" (77). Audronė Žukauskaitė sums up the method whereby Deleuze and Guattari stage the "philosophy of life" or "the philosophy of the impersonal": "a condition in which all living beings and all modes of existence can coexist on the same plane of immanence" (63). Deleuze defines this Beckettian strategy as "exhaustion," the combination of a "set of variables of a situation" without "preference," "organization in relation to a goal" or "signification" (*Essays* 153) that he believes to be copresent with "a fantastic decomposition of the self" (*Essays* 154). The emphasis on physical lassitude in Deleuze's analysis pays homage to what he sees as "Beckett's great contribution to logic," his having shown "that exhaustion (exhaustivity) does not occur without a certain

physiological exhaustion" (154). The physical toll and the virtual cataloging of permutations are co-present—one does not occur without the other.

Where *The Third Policeman* plays with both its protagonist and its readers by offering an ever-expanding array of one-legged characters—a spilling over of the very figure that has allowed us to trace the novel's poetics, *Molloy* follows the law of permutations to stage a practical joke that hinges on its own figurative key. A perfect complement to the narrative of physical decay and the various aches and pains associated with the two protagonists' legs, Molloy's final statement is striking in its implied retraction of the narrative that precedes it: "The fact is and I deplore it, but it is too late now to do anything about it, that I have laid too much stress on my legs, throughout these wanderings, to the detriment of the rest. For I was no ordinary cripple, far from it, and there were days when my legs were the best part of me, with the exception of the brain capable of forming such a judgement" (*Three Novels* 82). Molloy's and Moran's legs betray them. And they do not.

O'Brien's and Beckett's protagonists are "no ordinary cripple[s]." The authors' treatments of disability figuratively explore a writing generated outside the coordinates of the liberal-humanist subject. As models of writing, both supplementarity and accumulation transgress the convention of creative agency. Anthony Uhlmann describes such a shift as that which occurs between "a notion that art needs to be understood through recognition of the individual intuition of the artist, an intuition which often cannot be contained or expressed by language, to a notion that discourse is anonymous, belonging to groups rather than individuals, and which, in passing through individuals, animates them, playing them like marionettes" (*Philosophical Image* 111–12). *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy* offer an alternative to the method of textual production whose decline is already noted in the agonies of interrupted inspiration in Romanticism.[6] Here, the writer no longer controls the generation of text, but participates in it. The text happens to the writer; he suffers its production much as he does his physical impairments. Innovation and change are no longer the products of an independent and cohesive subject who masters expression and willingly creates. The new occurs, but it does so without intent, without design. It happens in that liminal space between the dismodernist subject and those texts that are constantly invading and attending on him. Moran's thoughts on Sisyphus are instructive in fleshing out the manner in which aberrations might occur in the "nothing new" (*Murphy* 1) of a universe of endless repetition. He notes: "it would not surprise me if I deviated, in the pages to follow, from the true and exact succession of events. But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places" (*Three Novels* 133).

Notes

1. Rosemarie Garland Thomson coins the term "normate" in *Extraordinary Bodies*. The neologism "names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries" (8).

2. Note a corresponding shift in the bioscientific language that describes the migration of donor cells within the transplanted subject's body. Shildrick traces the manner in which the process is no longer dominated by "metaphors of alien intrusion or invasion—which fit with conventional immunological discourse" but rather by "that of productive migration" (280). Pertinent to my paper is her suggestion that "Like every other authoritative discourse, bioscience invests in strategies of representation that finesse the evidence to fit a particular structure, but perhaps what is happening is a *subtle shift in the imaginary itself*" (280; italics added).

3. Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" depicts a more widely known version of the story. Here the ill-fate is that of a spoilt girl whose new red shoes will not allow her to stop dancing. The story was first published in 1845.

4. Maciej Ruczaj notes this coincidence as a marker of the protagonist's moral weakness:

> the theme of the left leg surfaces several times with possible ethical undertones, most prominently when Noman meets "the killer and the robber" Martin Finnucane, a character that fills him with fear and disgust but in reality is simply a mirror of his own self. This coequality is signalled in the text by the ultimate revelation that the robber also has a left leg made of wood. "Funny coincidence," Noman thinks, but it is not. ("Infernal Poetics" 98)

5. Anthony Uhlmann unpacks the symbolic significance of Moran's metamorphosis, in a passage which is particularly relevant to my understanding of the correspondence between disability and subjectivity. He writes:

> Moran changes physically, and the physical changes … produce corresponding affects in his mental state. The degeneration of the mind and body run parallel, and together they constitute a molecular metamorphosis which ends in prising Moran from his comfortable existence within the molar institutions. He was religious, a disciplinarian father, a good worker understanding both his station and his duty, with a well-kept house in a respectable community in which he was readily accepted; he ends with no belief in God (against whom he blasphemes), no interest in his son (whom he is about to abandon), unemployed and without interest in further work, allowing his house and property to run down, largely outside the community, on the verge of vagabondage. (*Poststructuralism* 68)

6. On the correspondences between Romantic and Modernist conceptions of interrupted inspiration see Lawley as well as Levin.

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