

THE TURDY MADONNA: RELIGION AND THE NOVEL IN GEORGE SAND AND SAMUEL BECKETT

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Readers of Beckett will perhaps recall a singular passage at the end of *Molloy*. It is evening. Moran is waiting alone, under his umbrella, when a big farmer accosts him from behind asking what he is doing on his land: "Un pèlerinage . . . à la madone de Shit," is Moran's reply.¹ When Beckett translates *Molloy* into English, he renders Shit as "Turdy," so that "la madone de Shit" becomes "the Turdy Madonna." One might think that the place-name, of Irish or English origin, would remain the same in translation. The neighboring Hole, for instance, remains Hole in the English text. Why translate in the first place? And, moreover, why translate in this way?

The comparison of Beckett's bilingual works reveals, according to scholars, a tendency to use colloquial language in French and more reserved language in English.² Attenuating "shit" with the more acceptable, or less improper, synonym "turd" would go along with this rule. But if we think about it, what does the rule really tell us here about the translation? What the rule does not explain, firstly, is the so-called translation of an English word by another English word. But, more importantly, it does not explain the shift from a noun to an adjective. In *Molloy*, Turdy is a place-name, the hub of Turdyba: Shit and Shitba in French. But when it comes to the alleged pilgrimage to "la madone the Shit," the Turdy Madonna, the English ear can not help hearing the adjective. One may wonder whether there is not from the beginning, in Beckett's ear, a play on words, something to do with translation.

I propose as a hypothesis that the translation works the other way around, that he translates Turdy as Shit before translating Shit as Turdy. So where, you must wonder, did I get this hypothesis? It did not come to me on its own, but rather in reading a novel by George Sand, *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*, which I was reading without the slightest thought of Beckett, when I came across a madonna in a place called Turdy. Did Beckett read this novel? And if so, is it to this reading that he owes his translation? Perhaps he hit on it alone, after all, as Molloy observes about the translations of his friend Lousse's parrot.³ But supposing he read it, as he may well have, one could think that the first translation would have been passive: Beckett would have heard the English sense of the word Turdy reading Sand's novel; later, in *Molloy*, he would have followed the same pattern, translating from French into

English in the French text, and from English into French in the English text. The French original would have vanished from the text only to reappear in the English translation, without leaving any trace of a translation.

Of the Turdy Madonna, we learn just one thing : She is the Madonna of pregnant women . . . of pregnant married women (158). Moran's comment would serve just as well for the madonna in *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*. In Sand's novel, the madonna is associated with the protagonist, Lucie La Quintinie, who worships her, and who ends up giving birth to a son in Turdy. Behind the story of Lucie, however, the madonna symbolizes the mystical love of her mother, Blanche de Turdy, with a priest, Moreali. The image of the Virgin mediates the relations between the main characters of the novel: between Lucie and her mother, and between both of them and Moreali, Lucie being, in the mind of Moreali, nothing but the image of her mother.

Mademoiselle La Quintinie, as Sand says in her preface, is the story of a priest. It is above all the story of a priest's relations with women; beginning with those with his own mother. On her deathbed, his mother apprises him of his illegitimate birth. While pregnant with him, she made a vow to consecrate him to God, hoping thereby to atone for her sin. Moreali's religious vocation is the consequence of an error. But religion will only be the means for him to repeat, and not to rectify, the error. Moreali's entire life rests on a misunderstanding of the relation between sin and forgiveness. It is in the hope of resolving the contradictions in his life that he turns to religion. But in religion he stops at the outward signs of a resolution, which serve only to hide the inner conflict. The religious images of chastity and purity conceal a desire both carnal and guilty.

Moreali is the incarnation of corrupt Christianity with all of its contradictions. Himself the fruit of adultery, he preaches the sanctity of marriage amidst a crowd of voluptuous women. A passionate seeker of obstruction, he desires only women who do not desire him. As he observes regarding confessional, all the women who come to him desire him: *Les plus belles femmes venaient à moi. Toutes m'aimaient, sinon avec réflexion et persistance, du moins avec entraînement, durant cette heure de tendre épanchement qu'elles apportaient à mes pieds* (290-91).⁴ Moreali's relations with other women reflect the ambivalence of his mother, alternately pure and impure. Just as he is looked upon as Christ

by the sinful women, he conceives of the ideal woman in the image of the Virgin Mary. The image towards which he aspires crystalizes in Blanche de Turdy:

Parmi les pénitentes que l'aristocratie de la province m'envoyait en trop grand nombre, une jeune fille charmante me consola par son angélique chasteté, par l'absence de tout instinct douteux à combattre, par une foi naïve pleine de scrupules attendrissants (291).

Mademoiselle La Quintinie is a political novel -- "un roman à thèse" -- against the Catholic church. Sand explains in her preface that she is using the form of the novel to criticize religion. But the opposite is no less true. Her usage of religious imagery at the same time contains a critique of the novel. The desacralization of religious metaphors which the entire novel serves to illustrate goes hand in hand with a demystification of the novel through religious metaphors. If the author follows convention in telling the story of a life, she innovates in juxtaposing the life of a novel's main character with a religious life. Like Nerval's protagonist in *Sylvie*, Moreali sacralizes anything associated with the object of desire. But whereas desire in Nerval fixes on objects of daily and profane life, Moreali's story unfolds from within the Church. The sacralization of the woman he loves is all the more veiled in that she already finds herself in a religious context. Contrary to the conclusion of *Sylvie*, where the protagonist recognizes the errors of his life, Moreali experiences no moment of ludicity. He persists in his blindness till the very end.

One day, Blanche's mother comes to consult with Moreali, informing him of Monsieur de Turdy's intention to marry her to colonel La Quintinie. At stake in Blanche's marriage is, on the one hand, religious belief, pitting Moreali and the pious Madame de Turdy against Monsieur de Turdy and the colonel, both of whom are unbelievers. On the other hand is Moreali's love for Blanche. Her presence at sermons fills him with a sense of plenitude. In her absence, he feels emptiness, his fervor wanes. The poetry of the church lies in the sacralization of the woman he loves, and not in religion. In his inner struggle, eternal religious values come into conflict with material and personal interest. Confusing jealousy with ecclesiastical duty, he vows to stop the marriage at any cost: Toutes les forces de mon âme étaient tendues vers ce but de

conserver vierge pour l'hymen du Christ cette âme digne de lui seul. A l'idée qu'un homme, et un homme sans croyances, se flattait de la profaner, j'étais dévoré d'indignation (294-95). For a time, Moreali succeeds in imposing his will upon Blanche, persuading her to take the veil. When she reveals her intention, however, her father intervenes. Moreali is appointed to another town where he learns of Blanche's marriage in a letter.

Married life is the beginning of the end for Blanche. Her husband's caresses are odious to her. She becomes ill and morose, gives birth to a daughter, Lucie. In a discussion she arranges with Moreali, she blames him for her unhappiness. She could have been content leading a material life, letting the common love of a man suffice. But Moreali forbids her to love, offering her instead of a man the image of Christ. After a while the image of Christ became confused in her mind with that of Moreali:

Je rêvais de vous, je vous voyais étendu sur cette croix à la place du Christ, et dans mes songes je baisais vos blessures, ou j'essuyais vos pieds avec mes cheveux, et je ne me rebutais pas quand vous disiez: "Femme, qu'y a-t-il de commun entre vous et moi?" (302)

The misunderstood love of Blanche and Moreali pertains to a reciprocal confusion of spirit and matter which they endeavor to separate. Just as Moreali spiritualizes the woman he loves, Blanche materializes Christ. Similarly, Moreali sees in Blanche the image of the Virgin, whereas Blanche sees herself as Mary Magdalen. The last time they meet before Blanche's death, she asks him to swear he will love her child as if, in flesh and blood, she were his own daughter. She asks him to look after the daughter she refers to as *their* child, and above all to preserve her from marriage.

The story of Blanche de Turdy is told only at the end of the novel in a confession. But *Mademoiselle La Quintinie* is firstly the story of Lucie. Keeping his promise to Blanche, Moreali arranges to become the spiritual director of Lucie, who knows nothing of her mother's story. For three years, Moreali is her teacher in a Parisian convent. Upon leaving the convent, Lucie returns to live with her grandfather in Turdy, while Moreali departs to Italy, making her promise to write regularly. As

before with Blanche, he is intent on preserving her from marriage. Meanwhile a young man, Emile Lemontier, begins courting her. Without being told of the nascent love between Emile and Lucie, Moreali nonetheless has a premonition. He comes back to her after a three-year separation.

Moreali's return is shrouded in mystery — the mystery of religion, the mystery of the love for the mother, of the ties to the daughter. Similarly, he returns mysteriously, under the cover of night, communicating his presence to Lucie through the intermediary of the madonna. The gardens of the château de Turty come to an end at a cliff overlooking the lac du Bourget. In a cave next to the lake is a chapel of the Virgin Mary, where Lucie goes to pray in the evening or at dawn. Upon his arrival in Turty, Moreali goes and places at the feet of the madonna a bouquet of lilies bound in a white silk ribbon with a sign, "un coeur de Marie, un coeur surmonté d'une croix et percé d'un glaive avec des gouttes de sang figurées en rouge carmin, emblème d'amour charnel, s'il en fut, avec une allusion à la douleur physique"(55). Moreali's offering symbolizes his desire for carnal union with Lucie, which he confuses with a spiritual union with the Virgin Mary in a repetition of his love for Blanche.

Whether by chance or otherwise, Moran's pilgrimage in *Molloy* corresponds to that of Moreali in *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*.⁵ Moreali's objective prefigures the one advanced by Moran both in the place-name and the nature of the request. After having lost the mother, he would like to keep the daughter. It is in wanting to keep the mother, moreover, that he lost her. Similarly, though inversely, Moran claims to have asked the madonna to lose his son so as to keep the mother: "It's thanks to her I lost my infant boy, I said, and kept his mamma . . . I told him more fully what alas had never happened (159-60). The admission of the lie told to the farmer is typical of Moran's unreliable narrative. The context, however, would seem to confirm the denial. The story told to the farmer does not fit with the second part of *Molloy* characterized by the absence of the mother and the presence of the son.

The task assigned to Moran at the beginning of his narrative is to find Molloy. It is only at the end, after abandoning his inquiry into the Molloy affair, that he invents the story of the pilgrimage to the Turty Madonna. Without finding either Molloy or the madonna, Moran's quest leads nonetheless to the world of Molloy, whom he comes to resemble more and more. Molloy is not looking for the Turty Madonna,

but for his mother, whom he calls amongst other things "the Countess Caca"(18). Like Moran, who claims to have asked the Turdy Madonna to rid him of his son, Molloy is grateful to his mother for trying to rid herself of him (19).

The predominance of women in Molloy's narrative goes hand in hand with the absence of distinctions between the sacred and the profane. The first part of the novel is in this sense the result of the second part which describes the departure from religious belief. At the beginning of his narrative, Moran still observes the distinction between Sunday and the other days, worries about drinking before communion. At the end, he tells Father Ambrose not to count on him any more. The loss of faith with which his quest concludes creates the conditions for the end of patriarchy.⁶ Whereas during the course of his mission Moran admits never having had to deal with a woman (126), he ends up invoking the Turdy Madonna.

In light of the comparison with George Sand, Moran's pilgrimage appears as a critique of romantic conventions. Beckett conceivably adopts for his own purposes Sand's critique of romanticism. What the Turdy Madonna represents is, literally, the sullyng of the feminine ideal. In *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*, George Sand endeavors to put an end to the feminine ideal. Her critique is directed openly at religion, and implicitly at literature, taking the poetry out of a conception of love which separates the ideal from the real woman. The same sort of reflection, taken to the extreme, ends up in Beckett with the "banalisation" of love in the western world. Molloy's love affairs, with Ruth, Edith and Lousse, which mingle in his memory with the image of his mother (55), banalize the repetition of novelistic patterns, as well as the interpretation of these patterns. Putting an end to the novel, if such is Beckett's aim,⁷ implies also putting an end to a certain representation of the feminine ideal, whose images are inherited from religion.

NOTES

¹ (Paris: Minuit, 1951) 288. Page numbers for quotations from *Molloy* in English refer to *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1959).

² See Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett, The Comic Gamut* (Rutgers University Press, 1962) 260-82. Amongst numerous examples taken from various works ranging from *Murphy* to *How It Is*, Cohn mentions in particular that of Turdy: "Moran's town Shit in French becomes the more tepid Turdy in English" (273). See also Leo Bersani, "No Exit for Beckett," *Partisan Review* (Spring 1966) 262.

³ "He exclaimed from time to time, Fuck the son of a bitch, fuck the son of a bitch. He must have belonged to an American sailor before he belonged to Lousse. Pets often change masters. He didn't say much else. No, I'm wrong, he also said, Putain de merde! He must have belonged to a French sailor before he belonged to the American sailor. Putain de merde! Unless he had hit on it alone, it wouldn't surprise me. Lousse tried to make him say, Pretty Polly! I think it was too late. He listened, his head on one side, pondered, then said, Fuck the son of a bitch" (36, my emphasis).

⁴ Genève: Slatkine, 1979.

⁵ The only pilgrimage presented explicitly as such in *Mademoiselle La Quintinie* is that of Emile to Rousseau's Charmettes (116).

⁶ Regarding the end of patriarchy in Beckett's trilogy, see John Vignaux Smyth, *The Habit of Lying* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ Regarding the ambiguity of Beckett's search for an end, see Bernard Pingaud, "Molloy douze ans après," *Les Temps Modernes* (janvier 1963) 1283-1300.