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## **Self Construction and Self Destruction: The Creative Gesture in *Malone Dies***

Valerie Higgins

Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* is a novel built on the creative gesture of a dying man, and as such it revolves around the tension between creation and disintegration. Even as Malone moves relentlessly towards death and final dissolution, he responds by setting out to tell himself stories, writing, "Now it is a game, I am going to play" (Beckett 180). However, the stories quickly move beyond Malone's original intentions, becoming an exploration of the self rather than a flight from it. In Beckett's *Malone Dies*, the creative gesture of writing stories serves as the means by which Malone asserts his identity in the world, his stories presenting an uncompromising portrait of the limited, bleak mortal existence but nonetheless affirming an active, creating, and questioning human consciousness in the face of that existence.

Malone clearly outlines his intentions at the beginning of his narrative, creating a plan for the course his writings will take and indicating that his stories will merely be a form of entertainment to distract himself from his own condition. He immediately tries to establish boundaries for his stories, writing within his first paragraph, "I shall not watch myself die" (179), and, "I shall not answer any more questions. I shall even try not to ask myself any more" (180). The stories are to be "playtime" (182) for Malone, not a time to focus on his own deteriorating state or difficult questions. Ethel Cornwell goes so far as to claim that "the Beckett hero does not seek his identity, he flees from it; his quest is for anonymity, for *self*-annihilation" (Cornwell 41). Although Malone does not seem to be ready to fully let go of his identity at this point, since he decides to first record his "present state" (Beckett 182) and plans to leave an inventory of his possessions behind, his statements about what he will not include in his stories indicate that he seeks to free himself from his identity through writing. Even at later points in his narrative, Malone will sometimes retreat to this original intention, such as when he writes, "I shall try and go on all the same, a little longer, my thoughts elsewhere, I can't stay here" (216), and, "In my head I suppose all was streaming and emptying away as through a sluice, to my great joy, until finally nothing remained, either of Malone or the other" (224).

However, the guidelines Malone establishes for himself at the outset quickly break down, and his stories become far more than a means by which to avoid subjects he does not wish to confront.

As Malone himself soon realizes, his stories function as a means of self-exploration and self-construction, his identity blending with those of his characters. Almost immediately after beginning his history of Sapo, Malone writes, "I wonder if I am not talking yet again about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?" (189), already perceiving that the escape he sought may turn into a trap, drawing him back to the very thing he planned to avoid. Much of Malone's narrative indicates that his characters Sapo and Macmann are indeed reflections of himself. In one instance he positions himself as a god creating Sapo and Macmann in his own image, writing, "I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say" (226), suggesting that Malone's characters are reflections of their author and that, to some degree, their journeys and experiences are his as well. He even equates himself with his characters when he notes, "I write about myself with the same pencil and in the same exercise-book as about him" (207). By constructing Sapo and Macmann's identities through writing, Malone is indirectly constructing his own. At another point Malone overtly states, "I did not want to write, but I had to resign myself to it in the end. It is in order to know where I have got to, where he has got to" (207). Story writing has become a means of self discovery for Malone, a way to find out where he has "got to" (207) rather than a way to lose himself. Though Malone tries to turn away from his identity, he is drawn back to himself through the characters he creates, asserting that identity through his writing rather than subordinating it to the stories.

However, if the stories Malone creates reflect his existence and identity, the image they present is a bleak one that relentlessly focuses on mortality and the inherent sterility of the very creative gesture of which the stories are a part. The content of the stories centers on futility and occasionally violence, often making actions that have the potential to be creative or productive deliberately sterile or self-defeating. For instance, the descriptions of the relationship between the elderly Macmann and Moll focus primarily on the lack of pleasure and fulfillment they experience, and when Moll becomes fatally ill,

her symptoms are such that “half a century younger she might have been taken for pregnant” (265), deliberately contrasting the traditionally procreative quality of a sexual relationship with the reality of Macmann and Moll’s relationship. At another point, Malone describes the apathy of Sapo’s parents, writing, “It was as though the Saposcats drew the strength to live from the prospect of their impotence” (188), again highlighting failure and lack of constructive action. Even small incidents, such as when Mrs. Lambert starts sorting lentils for supper but suddenly sweeps them together, “annihilating thus in less than a second the work of two or three minutes” (214), reflect this sense of futility. The content of the stories seems to reject the possibility of creation and progress, suggesting that the creative gesture of writing may itself be futile.

Beyond the content of the stories, Malone’s writing embodies this self-destructiveness as well, repeatedly introducing elements of incoherency and disintegration even as he tries to sustain a coherent narrative. He links the futility of the content of the stories to his flawed means of recording those stories, writing “It is no use indicting words, they are no shoddier than what they peddle” (195). Malone constantly undermines his narratives, calling into question basic facts about his characters rather than firmly determining them, such as when he writes, “Sapo had no friends—no, that won’t do. Sapo was on good terms with his little friends” (189), and arbitrarily changes Sapo’s name to Macmann, writing, “I can’t call him that any more” (229). Malone even exhibits doubt about the history of his own characters, admitting, “I have not been able to figure out why Sapo was not expelled” (190). In addition to constantly calling his own authority into question, Malone undermines his stories by interrupting them with self deprecating remarks, repeating, “What tedium” (189), numerous times and breaking into his own sentences to write, “This is awful” (191), again working against himself as he tries to construct his stories. Malone builds his fictions only to tear them apart a moment later, seemingly making the exercise self-destructive, as Malone himself realizes when he writes near the end of his narrative, “My notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record” (259).

Even in their basic physical construction, the stories reflect this self-destructiveness and exhibit a kind of mortality, as the means of writing are repeatedly shown to be fragile and finite.

With a slip of his fingers Malone can drop his notebook or pencil, losing his means of writing for days (222). Arbitrary, chance happenings have the power to silence Malone, a fact he emphasizes when, after recovering the pencil he lost, he writes, "I have spent two unforgettable days of which nothing will ever be known" (222). In addition to the ease with which Malone can be deprived of his means of writing, *Malone Dies* also focuses on how the very act of writing consumes Malone's materials for doing so. His pencil is "pointed at both ends" (222), an image that emphasizes the fact that it is steadily being consumed. This is reinforced by Malone himself when he writes that "little by little [his] little pencil dwindles, inevitably, and the day is fast approaching when nothing will remain but a fragment too tiny to hold" (223). His exercise book is also finite, and he worries that it will not last him through his death, a concern he illustrates when he decides, "From now on I shall write on both sides of the page" (209). Malone even links the limited life of these materials to human mortality, writing, "My lead is not inexhaustible, nor my exercise-book, nor Macmann, nor myself" (269). These images bring to the foreground not the creative potential of writing, but its self-consuming nature. The construction of the stories and their destruction become part of the same act, conditions which make the creative gesture appear largely futile and self-destructive.

However, despite the bleak image of the potential of the creative gesture that Malone's stories present, by choosing to write and managing to construct somewhat coherent narratives at all, Malone is able to assert not only his being but his identity and active consciousness in the world. He asserts his existence on a basic, physical level with statements like, "I have, I have. I suck" (199), and with his repeated discussions of his own bodily functions. He also asserts his identity by writing about himself and what he can recall of his own life, wondering where he has traveled (184), asking himself how many people he has killed (236), and even venturing briefly into his own childhood (268). Even Malone's interjections into his stories, which break up the coherency of the narrative and call into question the sustainability of those stories, serve to reassert the presence of the author, however doubting and contradictory that author may be. However, it is Malone's creative gesture of writing stories and the questions he asks himself about the meaning of what he is doing, such as, "But I tell myself so

many things, what truth is there in all this babble?" (236), that are most significant. These actions assert not just Malone's existence as an individual, but the existence of his active consciousness, a consciousness capable of creating and questioning in the face of all the limitations of the physical world and language.

While Malone is deeply ambivalent towards this assertion of his identity, the fact that he continues to write in the face of his doubts and the realization that he is sustaining his identity rather than distracting himself from it, as he set out to do, indicates that Malone's narrative is an affirmation, albeit a reluctant one, of his consciousness. Malone considers silencing himself at times, such as when he writes, "Perhaps I should throw away my lead. I could never retrieve it now" (253), but decides not to, writing, "I might be sorry.... It is a risk I do not feel inclined to take, just now" (253). Although he is tempted to do so, Malone cannot bring himself to cut himself off from his means of voicing his existence. Near the end of his narrative he decides to, if not silence his stories, at least silence his own identity, writing, "That is the end of me. I shall say I no more" (283). However, despite this decision, he does say "I" again before the end of his narrative. Even within his last few lines, he gropes for meaning and understanding, writing "I mean" (288) twice as he seeks to express himself. Malone may vacillate between the desire to assert his identity and consciousness and the desire to silence them, but if the end of the narrative is read as Malone's death, then unquestionably he affirms his own consciousness, constructing a written reflection of his thoughts rather than being silenced by his own doubts or even his desire for that silence.

The tension between Malone's apparent desire to silence himself and his inability to do so has been the focus of several critical discussions of *Malone Dies*, often leading to the conclusion that this tension is never resolved. Cornwell concludes that Malone ultimately fails since he "can never decide whether *to be or not to be*, to know or not to know" (Cornwell 45). She argues that "the narrator becomes increasingly aware that his chief task in life (and perhaps his only one) is self-creation. But self-creation involves the increase, not the diminution, of self-awareness; hence his dilemma, for the burden of selfhood is more than he can bear" (45). Clearly, Malone does experience this dilemma, as his

desire to distract himself from his condition and his later desire to silence himself when he realizes that those attempts at distraction can only lead to self exploration illustrate. However, the assertion that he cannot bear “the burden of selfhood” (45) seems questionable, since Malone confronts the possibility of discarding the expression of selfhood several times, but instead chooses to continue writing. He continues to construct that self, not flee from the burden it presents. Cornwell also sees Malone’s construction of stories as a flight from consciousness rather than an affirmation of it:

Unable to accept the responsibility or the isolation of human consciousness, Beckett’s narrator retreats to an inner corner which can be escaped only through insanity or death; the Beckett hero toys with both possibilities without adopting either, and remains torn by ambivalence, waiting for the end. (50)

While Malone periodically tries to free himself from his own consciousness throughout the narrative, he never does truly retreat from it. Even when he states that it is his intention to abandon his own identity, he always returns to himself, saying “I” and never going silent until the moment of his death. Malone may be ambivalent and torn as he waits for the end, but a retreat from consciousness would suggest a silencing of narration, not its continuation.

As the medium through which Malone explores his existence and asserts his consciousness, the creative gesture, despite its flaws and difficulties, becomes essential. As Simon Critchley writes, “The double bind within which the *Trilogy* wriggles, and out of which it is written, is that between the impossibility of narration or representation, and its necessity” (115). Mark Sachner agrees, claiming that in Beckett’s fiction “The situation is an absurd one, with the artist caught between the impossibility of creating and the absolute necessity for creating” (149). Although the presentation of the creative gesture within Malone’s narrative indicates that this gesture will inevitably destroy itself or be unproductive, Malone is nonetheless driven to continue writing. “Malone is an identity minimally held together by a series of stories” (Critchley 119), and the continuation of those stories and his narrative is the only way Malone can maintain a cohesive identity and consciousness, as Malone indicates when he writes, “At first I did not write, I just said the thing. Then I forgot what I had said.

A minimum of memory is indispensable, if one is to live really" (Beckett 207). However, Critchley goes on to argue that "Malone tries to silence the emptiness by telling stories but only succeeds in letting the emptiness speak as the stories break down into mortal tedium. Thus, stories are a deception, but a necessary deception: we cannot face the emptiness of death with them or without them" (120). While Malone does try to fill the emptiness of the remainder of his existence with his stories, he does more than let the emptiness speak through his writing. Although the content of his stories is bleak and their construction reveals the inevitability of their dissolution, up until the end of his narrative, Malone maintains stories that are basically coherent, despite their inconsistencies and interruptions. It is Malone who speaks through his stories, however unreliable and contradictory his voice may be, asserting his presence rather than merely reflecting the emptiness of his existence, as Critchley claims.

Mark Sachner takes a more positive view than Critchley of Malone's writing and makes the link between the continuation of those narratives and the continuation of consciousness, claiming that "what keeps the curve of his fiction moving on into infinity as it forever approaches, but never meets, its own destruction is the presence of the artistic consciousness that maintains itself through the narrative voice" (152). However much the stories may break down or contradict themselves by the end of the narrative, Malone is present throughout in his writing. However, Sachner does acknowledge the futility of Malone's writing in this statement as well, since he points out that, although the writing does not completely destroy itself, there is a tendency towards self destruction in it, even as Malone's consciousness sustains it for as long as that consciousness endures. Sachner calls it a "pattern of failure from which there is no escape" (153). Malone acknowledges this pattern of failure himself when he writes, "I began again. But little by little with a different aim, no longer in order to succeed, but in order to fail" (Beckett 195). Nevertheless, Malone responds to this futility by "continuing to write and, metaphorically, to live" (Sachner 153). *Malone Dies* sets up the seeming paradox that the creative gesture is imperfect and impossible to sustain but also necessary as a means of asserting consciousness in the world. In the face of this impossibility and futility, Malone goes on, sustaining his narratives to the last



possible moment and through that gesture asserting his own active, resilient consciousness. Malone succeeds in this, even as he fails to accomplish what he set out to do.

Malone's constrained condition and his response to that condition through the creative gesture are not unique to Malone as an individual; rather, his existence, reduced to the absolute essentials of life of "eat and excrete. Dish and pot" (Beckett 185), is representative of the human condition. According to Eric Levy, in *Malone Dies*, "particular experiences merge into and express the same unchanging and fundamental condition" ("Mimesis" 335). For Levy, the "Beckettian Man" has "nothing of his own save resemblance to his species. His voice is no longer the private wail of one man in pain, but that of humanity, the human species" ("Voice" 350). By reducing Malone to a series of bodily functions and a voice, both of which are limited by the inevitable approach of death, Beckett has made Malone a representative of all of humanity. According to Levy, the characters in Malone's stories stand in for all of humanity as well, because the "characters have experiences to be sure, yet these concern not personal problems, but the unmitigated suffering of human existence" ("Voice" 351). Malone's own words support this, as he makes a point of linking Macmann and his flaws to the human species, writing, "He was no more than human, than the son and grandson and greatgrandson of humans" (Beckett 240-241). By making Malone and his characters representatives of the human condition rather than merely individuals, Beckett makes their responses to that condition, including the creative gesture and all it entails, universal.

The creative gesture of constructing stories is at the center of *Malone Dies*. While the novel devotes much attention to the futility of a flawed, mortal being attempting to construct stories through the flawed medium of language, it affirms the necessity of making this gesture despite its essential futility. Construction of stories is the means by which Malone constructs and explores his own identity, ultimately affirming that identity and his consciousness in the face of an empty existence. Malone writes, "Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried" (194). Though Malone may never succeed in the way he intends, simply by trying he is successful in sustaining his consciousness and voice. Since Malone and his creations can be

interpreted as representatives of humanity rather than as individuals, Malone's stories and his own actions indicate that the creative gesture of story telling is a basic human activity, as primal as sucking, eating, and excreting. Through this gesture, as flawed as it is, human beings can assert their existence and their active consciousness even in the limited, bleak world that Beckett presents.

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