

**Kenneth Hamilton**

**BOON OR THORN? JOYCE CARY AND SAMUEL BECKETT  
ON HUMAN LIFE**

Is life a boon?  
If so it must befall  
That Death, whene'er he call,  
Must call too soon.

Is life a thorn?  
Then count it not a whit!  
Man is well done with it;  
Soon as he's born  
He should all means essay  
To put the plague away.

So SINGS Colonel Fairfax in *The Yeomen of the Guard*. It is doubtful whether the gallant colonel really considers these alternatives at all seriously, even though he is placed in what we to-day have learnt to call an "existential situation." At any rate, when the chance is offered him, he opts unhesitatingly for life. But the value of human existence is canvassed very seriously indeed in a good deal of present-day literature. And two notable fictional trilogies have taken their stand on opposite sides of the question. In his trilogy, *Herself Surprised*, *To Be a Pilgrim*, and *The Horse's Mouth*, Joyce Cary has defended the optimistic thesis. Samuel Beckett has expounded the pessimistic one in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*.

i

Cary's trilogy appeared during the last war, and the novels to some extent celebrate the spirit of the British people, a spirit born out of inherited tradition and always most evident in times of stress and danger. Cary himself is a traditionalist, especially in his craftsmanship. He has often been compared with Smollett, and he certainly belongs to the mainstream of the realistic tradition in English fiction. Yet just as certainly he is no propagandist, intent on "selling" the British way of life. Although the world described in the three novels extends from before Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee to the Second World War, there is hardly any

sociological interest. Each volume tells the story of a *self*. At the same time, while it is tempting to classify the novels as novels of character, something more than a sense of character gives the driving power to them. The individuals are more than case histories of lives. They are crystallizations of human life in itself. The three narrators—a cook-house-keeper, a lawyer, and an artist—in telling the story of their interrelated lives, demonstrate the capabilities of the human spirit as it is tested under the conditions of existence. And the three testify unanimously, though variously, that however heavily these conditions bear upon the human spirit they do not break it but instead allow it to expand itself. Life is a boon.

Of all Cary's creations Gulley Jimson, the painter, is the most intensely real as a character; and this has made *The Horse's Mouth*, in which Jimson speaks for himself, the best known of the author's books (it has recently been made into a lively film). Gulley has a Dickensian vitality, and he is one of the few artists in fiction whose genius we can believe in. He is a figure of high comedy. He is also the bearer of a message. As we read we cannot help feeling that his creator has made him a disciple of William Blake not altogether in the interests of character-drawing but also for our edification, and we realize that we are meant to react to the Jimsonian exposition of the Gospel according to Billy Blake by exclaiming "How typical of Gulley—and how true!"

Gulley Jimson is nearly forty when he is first introduced to us by Sara Monday in *Herself Surprised*: "a little bald man with a flat nose and a big chin. . . very shabby too, and had a front tooth missing." At the opening of *The Horse's Mouth* he is sixty-seven, altogether toothless, homeless, and just out of prison. Like Blake, he is unable to trim his creative vision to public taste and is faced in his old age with the ironic situation of having his pictures from an earlier period sought after while his present work is unsalable. He applies to himself Blake's wry lines:

The Angel that presided at my birth  
Said "Little creature, form'd of Joy and Mirth,  
"Go love without the help of Any Thing on Earth."

Unlike Blake, however, Gulley is by no means an open, candid, and guileless person. He delights in stratagems and double-dealings, is entirely unscrupulous over both property and personal relationships, and, as rising blood-pressure grows more troublesome with the years, realizes how "getting in a state" has been so often his undoing. His spells in prison are the result of a mania which drives him to make threatening phone-calls to a rich collector, called Hickson, who formerly paid him

a monthly allowance. Yet there is an innocence too in all his assaults upon the ten commandments, and an entire absence of calculated malice. His scheming is generally directed towards trying to escape being trodden under in the struggle for survival; and his efforts to pay the world back in its own coin—to be a knowing-one among the knowing-ones—usually gets him into more trouble, because there are some commandments he will not break. He will not blaspheme against the God of the Human Imagination he serves, and he will not let his own interests interfere with the service of the art to which he has been called. Sara Monday, who understood him better than any one, though she thought he was wasting his life on a delusion, understood this: "Then I remembered that I had never heard Gulley swearing and from all I knew this was Gulley's religion. Not to trouble about his ups and downs. But to get on with his work. And I liked him for this too." The comedy of Gulley's story lies in the resourcefulness and pugnacity of a little man willing to take on all comers. Its pathos lies in the loneliness of a dedicated life that has few other supports than laughter to save it from despair. But, in the actual act of creation, this life knows blessedness. "For Gulley had two smiles," says Sara, "his smile of keeping up, and his smile of joy, which was like any street child's with a sugar bun." And Gulley himself interprets this capacity for ecstatic experience with the help of Blake:

"I have no name:  
 "I am but two days old."  
 What shall I call thee?  
 "I happy am—  
 "Joy is my name."  
 Sweet joy befall thee!

Cary has made Gulley magnificently articulate, and this keeps the fun rolling. It also keeps the message of the book to the fore, as Gulley enlarges upon his Blakean vision of the world. This vision has its foil in the outlook of the shoe-mender Plant, one of Gulley's companions in adversity, who puts his faith in Spinoza. Gulley argues that his friend's philosophy is good in so far as it removes the hope of getting what one deserves in life and reconciles people to what is coming to them anyway. But it fails to give consolation in the long run (as is proved when Plant loses his right hand and so his ability to work) because it sets men over against an indifferent fate. It leaves humanity outside the real universe of its concern. As against Spinoza's objectivity, Blake takes an inside view of life. Creation means the Fall, a Fall which is out of eternity into

time, space, and pain, but also into the freedom which is life and which is fulfilled in creativity—in Gulley's paintings, for instance:

But what you get on the inside, I said to myself, is the works—it's SOMETHING THAT GOES ON GOING ON. Hold on to that, old boy, I said, for it's the facts of life. It's the ginger in the gingerbread. It's the apple in the dumpling. It's the jump in the OLD MOSQUITO. It's the kick in the old horse. It's the creation. And that's where it's leading me. Right up to that blasted picture.

At the end of the book Gulley has a stroke and falls while working on a mural of the Creation on a crumbling wall. His large canvas of the Fall has been cut up to patch a roof. Hickson is dead, Plant dying, and Gulley has killed Sara accidentally by a push that sent her down the cellar stairs. In the last paragraph a nun is tending him in a police ambulance:

"It's dangerous for you to talk; you're very seriously ill." "Not as seriously as you're well. How you don't enjoy life, mother. I should laugh all round my neck at this minute if my shirt wasn't on the tight side." "It would be better for you to pray." "Same thing, mother."

We should be prepared to face the loss of all things—including life itself—for the sake of experiencing the creativity of life which is found only by cherishing the living moment: this is the moral adorning the tale of Gulley Jimson.

It is also the moral of the other two novels. Sara of *Herself Surprised* is an artist in life as Gulley is in paint. "Life delights in life," says Gulley, "especially with Sara." That is why Gulley loved her, painted her, beat her, left her, and could not forget her. With her country training and her stock of country maxims, Sara is always consciously on the side of religion and morality but, as Gulley saw, she is actually without scruple, trusting implicitly in her power to create happiness for her men-folk. Also, like Gulley, although she loves to scheme and plot, in the last resort she uses her creative powers without regard for herself; and so her position in the world declines. At the beginning of *Herself Surprised* she has made a "good marriage," rising from cook to wife—a success she never repeats, though widowed before forty. At the end of the book she is in prison for having over the years robbed her employer, the lawyer Wilcher, partly in order to send money to Gulley. Wilcher, to whom she is "Mrs. Jimson," had been willing to marry her when the scandal broke and his family stepped in to prevent the marriage. In *The Horse's Mouth* we see her "a fat old char with grey hair and a red face, breathing beer and suds," yet in her smile still, "Herself, Sara. The individual female. The real old original fireship."

Wilcher of *To Be a Pilgrim*—"the plodding younger brother," as Cary describes him—is the antithesis of Gulley, and neither of them sees any good in the other. A dreamer behind his conventional facade, Wilcher realizes that "the secret of happiness, of life, is to forget the past, to look forward, to move on," yet he feels himself deficient in the will to adventure. He needs to take the power to live and to believe from others more vital than himself, and in the crisis of his later years leans upon Sara for the same reason that Gulley found it necessary to fly from her. Parted from her by his relatives, he loses his will to live. In his final illness, however, he regains his confidence in existence, certain now that real faith in traditional values means accepting the death of the old which has served its day. *To Be a Pilgrim* ends, in an oddly similar way to *The Horse's Mouth*, with the dying narrator teasing the one who is nursing him for taking life too seriously.

## ii

To-day we are sometimes inclined to identify literary pessimism with the existentialism of post-war Europe. It is easy to forget that twentieth-century pessimism has deep roots in the nineteenth century and that it is not exclusively "Continental." For instance, at a time when the very English W. S. Gilbert was creating Colonel Fairfax and the other cheerful characters of the Savoy Operas, the equally English Thomas Hardy was drawing up his indictment of the powers that govern human existence. Now, Samuel Beckett has made his home in France, and the works that have made him well-known were written first in French. Also the mood of his writing chimes in well with the *nausée* and *angoisse* preached by Sartre and Camus. Some of it reads as though it were an exercise presenting "atheistic" existentialist theory in literary form. Yet a good deal of Beckett's mood and part at least of his characteristic subject-matter are to be found in his pre-war English stories and poetry. So the label *existentialist* does not explain everything.

Nevertheless, whatever the roots of his pessimism, Beckett certainly conceives life to be a thorn, and a very wounding one at that.

In contrast with the traditional realism of Cary, Beckett creates a world like Kafka's, where the details are realistic and the setting fantastic. The Macmanns, Mahods, Molloyes, Malones, Merciers, Morans, and Murphys of his imagination are, each of them, Man facing his existence and wholly concentrated on grasping the meaning of what is happening to him. In form, the trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* are interior monologues in the Joyce manner. But, whereas Joyce's Molly Bloom monologue in *Ulysses* is meant to catch the free movement of

thought, and Earwicker's torrent of "portmanteau" words in *Finnegan's Wake* represents consciousness between sleeping and waking, Beckett's characters are engaged in incessant deliberation and self-analysis. They are historians set on the task of reconstructing that portion of the past or present which impinges on them; or else they are analysts scrutinizing their imaginations at work. They toil at their task with the scrupulous care of scholars or craftsmen. But they continually find themselves hampered, and by two obstacles chiefly: the body and the mind. For, somewhat after the fashion of the Old Woman in the Mother Goose rhyme who "lived upon nothing but vittles and drink," Beckett's heroes find nothing to complain about in life except the conditions of life itself.

The physical aspect of living is the most evident target of Beckett's attack. Probably not since Swift has there been a writer who has shown a stronger antipathy to the body and its functions, and this antipathy has an even larger place in Beckett's work than it had in Swift's. Infirmity and decay beset all his main characters. They suffer from man's malice intermittently, but from the malignity of nature continually. But if the body is a stumbling-block and an adversary, the mind is also. In the earlier novel *Murphy*, the hero, when strapped to his rocking-chair, was able to escape temporarily from his body into the pleasures of his mind; but in the trilogy, thought appears to stand condemned because it, too, is a quality of life. Because it operates through the senses it shares their fallibility. Every statement that can be made is uncertain; it can be questioned, amplified, corrected, and contradicted—all at once. Every memory or impression probably lies. And yet, although for Molloy and Malone their condition and even their identity is confused and doubtful, and while the narrator of *The Unnamable* has altogether lost the clue to his proper being, somehow these selves transcend their existence. Thus the dying Malone, engaged in "establishing the present," can say:

All my senses are trained on me, me. Dark and silent and stale, I am no prey for them. I am far from the sounds of blood and breath immured. I shall not speak my sufferings. Covered deep down among them I feel nothing. It is there I die, unbeknown to my stupid flesh. That which cries and writhes, my witless remains. Somewhere, through all this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark. It too seeks me, as it always has, where I am not to be found. It too cannot be quiet. On others let it wreck its dying rage, and leave me in peace.

Life, then, is a thorn and a plague for which there is no remedy. To attempt to put this plague away is as futile as to expect it to change its nature. Man can get *nowhere*, in life or away from it. The rocking-chair in *Murphy*, Hamm's invalid chair in *End Game*, the two bicycles that prove useless in *Molloy*, and the tree upon which Didi and Gogo fail to

hang themselves in *Waiting for Godot* all speak the same story. (The wheels almost certainly symbolize the meaningless circle of existence, and the tree a Cross that can bring no salvation). At the same time, because the stuff of life can be recognized as an "it" which is not the self, the self can be apart from and superior to its temporal existence. Thus Beckett's nihilistic pessimism results in something very like Stoicism; only it is a Stoicism founded, not on a universal reason behind the natural order as classical Stoicism was, but upon the irrationality of the world of appearances.

Stoicism's practical teaching centred upon the all-importance of choice; and here it is the same. Sartre has argued that the denial of values by which to measure choice as being "right" or "wrong" does not make choice any less important. Though meaningless as an objective act, to set the will in motion is to achieve freedom and to banish the bonds of illusion. Beckett seems to follow this line of thinking. The wise man is necessarily happy, whatever appearances may suggest, because he is essentially free: Molloy, for example.

In the first part of the book, Molloy, an old man with crutches and a bicycle, seeks his mother. He does not find her, of course. He does not hope to, particularly. He has found her in the past, without anything particular coming of it. But he moves on, stopping for longer or shorter periods as the thought takes him; for, if he moves among deceits, he is never deceived:

For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. So that I was never disappointed, whatever I did, in this domain. And these inseparable fools I indulged turn about, that they might understand their foolishness.

He knows that choice is always between worthless things and others even more so—a "change of muck" which is always the same. Neither regret nor hope touches him for long. Even the inner voice urging him to seek his mother has no authority over him:

And in this command which faltered, then died, it was hard not to hear the unspoken entreaty, Don't do it Molloy. In forever reminding me thus of my duty was its purpose to show me the folly of it? Perhaps. Fortunately it did no more than stress, the better to mock, if you like, an innate velleity.

At last, progressing through the forest in wintertime, Molloy cannot even walk, but crawls painfully a few yards each day. With the spring he finds himself at the edge of the forest and hears (with indifference, naturally) a voice offering help, and also the song of birds. Here

the first half of the book ends. In the second half, Moran, a detective sent to track down Molloy, becomes lame and ailing like the latter and, like him, journeys along in misery through a whole winter season. Once home again, he knows he has broken forever with his former way of life. He listens to the language of the birds and to a voice telling him what to do.

The way in which Moran recreates Molloy's pilgrimage in his own experience (external details such as a bicycle and a pair of crutches pointing up the link between them) calls to mind Kierkegaard's category of *repetition*, which Kierkegaard describes as being "educated by existence." This is precisely Moran's experience. To use the terminology of Heidegger's brand of existentialism, he has been brought from unauthentic to authentic existence. He learns to despise as trivial everything that he had formerly lived for: his house, his bees, his regular routine, his eye for detail, his power to control the actions of others, his religion. He is changed—and yet he is more sure of his identity than ever before. It might be said that the spirit of Molloy lives in him, that he has gained his "soul."

iii

Cary's Gulley Jimson and Beckett's Molloy have not a little in common: their indifference to self-interest; their contempt for prudence, moderation, and "common sense;" their self-knowledge; and their candid, objective scrutiny of the world about them. Neither of them lives "for the world," and so they are not deceived by the idols of power, wealth, security, and reputation that so many worship. Both have an independent indifference to fate and fortune which makes them appear "as having nothing yet possessing all things." The other side to this independence is their disregard for society and the ethical norms by which society maintains itself. By what are very properly called "normal standards," they are appallingly lacking in decency and responsibility. Yet, if they are social anarchists, they are so not merely by way of revolt but on principle—even if the principle be an assertion that there are no principles. So they are not simply delinquents; they are *believers* who insist on carrying out their beliefs. They live consistently with their conviction that the universe does not, of itself, make sense. They repudiate alike the God of religion and the Absolute of philosophy.

Gulley is an optimist, however, because he sees that, although the universe as a whole is meaningless, there is meaning to be found in human existence. Following Blake, he calls this meaning "eternity" and its discovery "imagination." For Gulley life is good, though bitter in the living. It has joy in it because, as Blake's aphorism has it, "Eternity is in



love with the productions of time." In other words, you must endure the limitations of existence in order to see and enjoy its glories; for its glories they are, to be found nowhere else except in this "fallen" (i.e. temporal) world. Only the imagination is eternal. And only men, who are born and die, possess imagination. Hence life is a boon—yes, in spite of all, the boon of boons.

Pessimism denies meaning (i.e. eternity) to existence. And, as Plato pointed out long ago, a world that knows nothing of the eternal is necessarily a flux about which nothing certain can be known. That existence is something opaque to knowledge is a favourite theme of Molloy's:

And how can you want to know? No, all that is not worth while bothering about, and yet you do bother about it, your sense of values gone. And the things that are worth while you do not bother about, you let them be for the same reason, or wisely knowing that all these questions of worth and value have nothing to do with you, who don't know what you're doing, nor why, and must go on not knowing it, on pain of, I wonder what, yes I wonder.

But pessimism has its limits. While there is any awareness of life, there must also be recognition of some meaning in it, however fragmentary. The thorn which is Molloy's life is not pure featureless flux: it has something of eternity in it. Otherwise Molloy would have nothing to record, and could not tell of the wounds he received nor of his contempt for them. Actually, Molloy needs existence in order to proclaim his indifference towards it. In *The Unnamable* a kind of limit of *describable* flux is reached. The narrator does not know who he is, or where, or why. He is troubled solely with cryptic impressions of uncertain happenings about him, and of contradictory intimations concerning his existence. Yet all the time, like Malone, he is preoccupied with "me, me." And he fully shares the defiant Stoicism of Molloy. His final words are ". . . you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

The decisive difference between the worlds of Gulley Jimson and of Molloy is that the latter has no joy in it. Joy necessarily pre-supposes community, since joy entails the outgoing movement of love. Thus Gulley's indifference to the rules of society does not cut him off from his fellows—indeed it involves him with others in an intense and often peculiarly uncomfortable way. His duty is continually in his thoughts, and this duty is a duty owed to life ("Go love without the help of Any Thing on earth") and so to all mankind. Through his belief in the eternal world of imagination mediated by the fallen world of existence, Gulley makes contact with the Christian belief in the solidarity of all the sons of Adam, a belief expounded by John Donne in a familiar passage: "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the

maine." It is this solidarity in particular that is repudiated in Beckett's neo-Stoicism. There was no place for emotion in the Stoic creed because emotion—especially pity—imperils self-sufficiency. And the inhabitants of the joyless, loveless cosmos that Beckett depicts are thoroughly callous in their defiance of life. Molloy casually attacks and leaves for dead an old charcoal burner who makes a move to detain him in his travels—an action repeated by Moran in connection with an inquisitive stranger. Here we have a direct denial of Donne's conviction that "any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde." Says the changed Moran at the end of his travels, "I have been a man long enough. I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more."

It is not accidental that the last book of Beckett's trilogy is called *The Unnamable*. The more that the conditions of life are rejected and the farther that the existing individual shrinks away from the gifts of life to find a solace in the lonely security of self, the less of self there is to be found. Without eternity around us the call for "me, me," must be a call in the void, never to be answered. Life may be a thorn, yet it must be a boon also or I cannot know what it is. And, if I do not know what it means to exist, I cannot know my own "name" (i.e. what it is to have an identity). Gulley Jimson knows perhaps the most important thing there is to know about human existence when he knows that life can carry the quality of eternity. For eternity discloses love, and love brings the knowledge of all things, and so allows man to know his own name. There is a salutary challenge in the pessimistic view of life, since it clears away sentimentality and the destructive illusions which breed wherever the mind is allowed to settle undisturbed upon its stock of ready-made opinions. But man cannot live by disinfectants alone, and Beckett's trilogy shows how an extreme pessimism ends by having nothing left to cleanse, having destroyed all life in the meanwhile. There is need for an optimism that knows why life can be good and can participate in that goodness, an optimism that knows that as well as a smile of keeping up there is a smile of pure joy:

"I happy am—  
 "Joy is my name."  
 Sweet joy befall thee?