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Interpreting Samuel Beckett's 'Worstward Ho'

Hisgen, Ruud

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The Silencing of the Sphinx
Volume II
Interpreting Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*



Interpreting Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*

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hoogleraar in de Faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen,
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Promotor:	Professor Dr. Th.L. D'haen
Referent:	Professor J. Pilling, University of Reading (G.B.)
Promotiecommissie:	Professor Dr. B. Westerweel Professor Dr. A.G.H. Anbeek van der Meyden Professor G. Lernout, Universiteit Antwerpen (België)

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Keine Wahrheit ist also gewisser ... als diese, daß Alles, was für die Erkenntniß da ist, also die ganze Welt, nur Objekt in Beziehung auf das Subjekt ist, Anschauung des Anschauenden, mit Einem Wort, Vorstellung. (Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*)

Nichts erschien ... thörichter als der letzte Versuch, mit Worten, die niemals einen Inhalt haben können, endlos von nichts zu sprechen als von der eigenen Unwissenheit. Gerade aber solche schwarze Stunden und Tage endeten häufig mit dem spornenden Gefühl: jawohl es ist der letzte Versuch, es ist das letzte Wort, und weil es nicht die Lösung des Sphinxrätsels sein kann, so ist es wenigstens die erlösende That, welche die Sphinx zum Schweigen zwingt, weil es die Sphinx vernichtet. (Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*)

ABBREVIATIONS USED

Bair	Deirdre Bair, <i>Samuel Beckett</i>
CC	John Pilling, ed., <i>The Cambridge Companion to Beckett</i>
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i> , London, 1984
CSPlays	<i>Collected Shorter Plays</i> , London, 1984
CSProse	<i>Collected Shorter Prose</i> , London, 1984
"Dante ..."	"Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce", in <i>Disjecta</i>
<i>Disjecta</i>	<i>Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment</i>
<i>Dream</i>	<i>Dream of Fair to Middling Women</i>
<i>Essays</i>	Schopenhauer, <i>Essays and Aphorisms</i>
IMEC	Institut Mémoires de l'Edition Contemporaine
JOBS	<i>Journal of Beckett Studies</i>
<i>Proust</i>	<i>Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit</i>
RUL	Reading University Library
TfN	<i>Texts for Nothing</i>

INTRODUCTION

Worstward Ho is the last and most hermetic of the three “longer” prose works Beckett published in the early 1980s: *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) and *Worstward Ho* (1983).¹ *Worstward Ho* is hermetic in the very literal sense that it can only be properly understood from a thorough knowledge of Beckett’s entire *oeuvre*. Conversely, a thorough critical examination of *Worstward Ho* strongly affects one’s reading of the earlier work. Indeed, it is the thesis of the present study that *Worstward Ho* represents the *tête morte*, or essence, of Beckett’s *oeuvre*.

Worstward Ho’s title, with its awkward coinage “worstward”, can itself be read as the *tête morte* of the book’s narrative. The ejaculation “ho” in “worstward ho” makes it the narrator’s exhortation to the reader, like that of the stagecoach driver to his prospective passengers, to join him on a journey to the worst possible state: the condition of “nohow on”.² Throughout the text the narrator yearns for the end of his journey, the moment when words will go, when eternal silence and nothingness will finally set in, when the wordly self will relax its hold, when “nohow on” will have been said for the last time: the terminus both for the narrator and for the reader.

The timeless and placeless quality of *Worstward Ho* suggests that the narrative takes place in an other-worldly setting. A characteristic of “the place” as it is introduced at the opening of the book is that it is *beyondless* (14),³ which may well be because the peculiarly barren, virtually featureless void of *Worstward Ho* is itself the beyond. Beckett’s fear, despite his sceptical attitude to Christian religious beliefs, that the mind’s activity may not cease at death has been drawn attention to before.⁴ *Play* dramatises how the mind after death keeps turning over its last thoughts in the moment before death; the indistinct setting of *A Piece of Monologue* may be that of the shadowy region between life and death: the speaker draws attention to the same ubiquitous and sourceless dim light as does the narrator of *Worstward Ho*.⁵

At the opening of the book the mind whose workings are being observed is minimal. In the course of 96 paragraphs of dense elliptical language the narrator’s mental scope is to be gradually narrowed even further. The narrator proceeds through manipulating the dim images evoked at the beginning of the book, sys-

tematically reducing them until they are nothing but pinpoint-size specks literally almost vanishing in the surrounding void: “At bounds of boundless void. Whence no farther.” At the end of the book, the narrator’s mind is filled completely with a great all but void: the image of an almost featureless universe.

Despite the bleakness of the vision the tone of the penultimate paragraph, heralding the end, is one almost of satisfaction: “Best worse no farther” (95). The last words of the paragraph dwindle away along with the last of the narrator’s intellect:

Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on. (95)

If there is at this last stage no evidence of any joy or bliss experienced (a sense of joy is anticipated earlier in the text, at 57), it is because there are no words left to express this experience.

Many familiar Beckett themes make their appearance in *Worstward Ho*: Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum” and the attempt to represent mental processes in language; the desire for mental silence; Berkeley’s dictum “esse est percipi”; the impossibility of talking about nothingness; the circularity of transmutations, in which the polarities always coincide; the incessant movement between the luring world of the self and the “unself” of the external world. But most poignant in *Worstward Ho* is Beckett’s favourite theme, “fallor, ergo sum”,⁶ demonstrated by the paradox that the greatest artistic achievement is ultimate failure. The repetition in *Worstward Ho* of phrases like “better worse” indicates the essential identification of success with failure: the maximum failure of the mental exercise is the greatest success. This recalls Beckett’s treatment of failure in his critical writings, in particular the way in which Bram van Velde in the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* is ascribed failure as an artistic credo, which Beckett obviously regards as a desirable artistic objective:

My case ... is that van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticised automatism [to escape from a sense of failure], ... the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living. (*Proust*, p. 125)

The most Beckett as a writer can hope to achieve is the state when further reduction of words and their corresponding images is not possible (“nohow less”) and it

is thus no longer possible to continue (“nohow on”). However hard the writer tries, the experience of absolute nothingness cannot be expressed in words—“nohow naught”, as the narrator expresses it in *Worstward Ho*.

In *Worstward Ho* direct links with the real world are lacking. Indeed, there is so little information that it is extremely difficult to posit an intelligible world of any description within the work. The effect on the reader is a sense of bafflement, and even of uncertainty.⁷ Like all of Beckett’s *oeuvre*, *Worstward Ho* is presented as a work of fiction. But a case can be made for suggesting that it is both a great deal less and a great deal more.⁸ Is it an exploration of the workings of the human mind and its mental boundaries? Is *Worstward Ho* a meditation on death, like a sixteenth-century *vanitas* painting? Is it a prose-poem on a metaphysical theme? Is it a parody of modern literature as seen through the eyes of a post-modernist? Is *Worstward Ho* a philosophical treatise on the nature of reality disguised as fiction? By consistently thwarting the reader’s attempts at correlating the fictional with the phenomenal world *Worstward Ho* invites a plurality of readings.

The main purpose of the present volume is to supply a number of possible approaches towards a reading of *Worstward Ho*. Though these are intended primarily to elucidate *Worstward Ho*, it is hoped that they will also be found useful for a reading of Beckett’s other works. In his efforts to make sense of *Worstward Ho*, the reader can make use of a number of strategies, on a variety of levels. On the level of the text itself, for example, the strategy could be to compare its linguistic usage with accepted linguistic norms in order to become more conscious of the text’s idiosyncratic use of language and so to begin to fathom its effects. On the level of the context of Beckett’s other writings, themes and verbal echoes may be recognised. And finally there are the clues that Beckett’s known interests, preoccupations and reading may offer.

In his biography of Beckett James Knowlson suggests that the efforts demanded of the reader match those of the author in composing the text:

Beckett took seven months to write even the first draft of *Worstward Ho*. At times during the winter of 1981–2, it sickened him. “Struggling with impossible prose. English. With loathing,” he wrote to Alan Schneider in February. Yet he was driven on by the compulsion to express that had always seemed more important than anything else in his life. The text that was published a

year later in England and the United States is difficult and uncompromising. Yet it justifies perseverance and, with *Ill Seen Ill Said*, may come to be judged as one of his greatest works.⁹

In literary practice, as in the other arts, this century has witnessed countless attempts to break with the naturalistic modes of expression which were perceived as unnecessarily restrictive and incapable of expressing the absurdity and agony of the human predicament. All the traditional elements of literary fiction, like plot, characterisation and familiar relations of time and space, have in the course of this century been stretched beyond their apparent limits. What readers do whenever they are confronted with a problem of meaning in a text is to provide—involuntarily—a context in which the text does make sense. In more conventional fiction the context is defined by the fictional narrative itself. That is to say, a fictional text usually takes the reader's knowledge of the world as its basis, and provides additional or alternative materials to suit its purposes and designs. But *Worstward Ho* gives no additional or alternative materials, and fails to provide any direct link between the reader's knowledge or understanding of the world and the writer's. Unlike conventional fiction, *Worstward Ho* has, for example, no feelings, no relationships, no characters other than the three “shades”, no dialogue, no sound (with the possible exception of the groan in paragraph 9), no colours, no recognisable physical setting. The only one of the senses represented is seeing. The only time is the present time of the narrative, without any reference to real time as we know in daily life. The reader must therefore attempt to provide his own links between the text and his knowledge or understanding of the world, taking any minute cue possible from the text, from Beckett's *oeuvre* and from the literary and linguistic universe he shares with Beckett.

Chapter 1 explores Beckett's minimal use of conventional narrative technique in *Worstward Ho*, outlining the main narrative development. This consists in a quest for ultimate silence, in which the narrator attempts to quell the words and the mental images they engender: a process he calls “worsening”. This process is seen to follow along lines of obsessive rationality. The reasoning in *Worstward Ho* is analytical, using such devices as mathematical logic and a dialectic not unlike the hypothetical question–answer method used by philosophers such as Plato and more recently Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. In its representation of the

narrator's reasoning *Worstward Ho* achieves almost full iconicity (the attempt to imitate the thing to be expressed in the use or organization of the material used to express that thing) and almost full absence of occasion (the [non-mental] reality that is conventionally used for representational artistic expression).

Beckett's use of language is the subject of Chapter 2. Beckett had a life-long obsession with language as an inadequate tool for description of the phenomenal world, and for the thought processes in the human mind. Yet as a writer he has only one means to bring his quest for ultimate silence to completion: words. His relationship with words is of necessity a love-hate relationship, for he is well aware that his attempt to escape from them will necessarily end in failure. "What Is the Word", written shortly before his death and the last text published in his lifetime, is Beckett's final admission of failure to explore beyond what words may express. In this text he describes the futility of attempts to make sense of things that evade observation and experience. "It is folly", says the poem, "seeing all this this here, for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there"

what—

what is the word—

what is the word

In "What Is the Word" Beckett emphasises that while words are man's only tool, at the same time they form the bars of the prison of his mind. Language is an inadequate tool even to say what it is we are trying to examine. How may we then expect to be able to say anything intelligible about the subject of the examination?

... [W]hat we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail. (*Watt*, p. 61)

From *Watt* (written 1941–1945) to "What Is the Word" (1988) Beckett questions the relationship between the world of reality and the inner world of language.

The concentration of language Beckett achieved in *Worstward Ho* is an extraordinary tour-de-force, unique in his *oeuvre*.¹⁰ The book's linguistic tightness is borne

out by the fact that it is the only one of his major works which he never attempted to translate into the other of his two languages, and which he could probably never have written in the other language. Early in his writing career, Beckett himself said that he started using French because he wished to write without style.¹¹ By this he meant that the complex web of cultural and historical meanings and personal memories that was attached to the use of English hampered the precision of language as an artistic tool which he needed for the expression of self. Because French, his second language, was at least for some time devoid of such meanings and memories, it served as the filter whereby the unwanted echoes could be left behind, allowing him to handle the words as style-free objects. In the course of his writing career Beckett switched from French to English and back again in order to strip his linguistic expression of excess semantic baggage. *Worstward Ho* can be considered as the ultimate result of all these years of divesting language of its unwanted accretions. In *Worstward Ho* Beckett has proved himself able to use English almost as if it were a foreign language.¹² Beckett has here struck the absolute rock bottom of his language and style: both a syntax and a vocabulary “of weakness”, and he no longer needs French to achieve this aim.

Worstward Ho comes close to fulfilling Beckett’s desire to ban expression through reducing the images that occur in his mind to their minimal form. Yet the words remain indissolubly linked to the phenomenal world. The chief barrier in the worsening process is that man’s entire concept of self is language-based. In Beckett’s work language (embodied in the voice that virtually all his characters permanently hear) can even be said to be synonymous with residing in the phenomenal world. In *Worstward Ho* words continue to well up from the subconscious so that the narrator, who wants them to end, or at least to cease to signify, exclaims in exasperation: “How almost true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting [they are] in inanity!” (38.3–4). Since there exists a non-separable nexus between words and the images they call up in the mind, imagination is forced to remain at work, however minimally. An exploration of the various linguistic strategies to break the nexus is the subject of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 traces the roots of Beckett’s preoccupation, from *The Unnamable* on, with the relationship between self and “unself” (the terms he uses in his opera libretto *neither*), between the individual and the world in which he lives. Both the treatment of his intractable subject and the resulting style have led to Samuel

Beckett being called an exponent of the *nouveau roman* as well as an absurdist. In the final analysis, however, the *nouveau roman*, though it fights conventions, remains conventionally naturalistic in the sense that it still insists on reflecting the world, even if it is a world perceived as utter chaos. Beckett does not attempt to reflect in his work the world outside, objective or subjective. And even though Beckett's theatre in many ways resembles the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett's focus is neither on society nor on the role of the individual in society. In his postwar *oeuvre* Beckett embraced the inner darkness of the human mind as his abiding subject, and that of his own mind as the motor of his creativity. To Ludovic Janvier Beckett hinted that the "implosion" of writings, which launched the writer "dans l'aventure de la diction, de la fiction du soi", was foreshadowed by *Watt* and confirmed by a revelation "lors d'un séjour en Irlande, un soir qui ressemble beaucoup à la nuit du Krapp de *la Dernière Bande*".¹³ This is the night when, as Krapp noted to himself on tape, it became

... clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most— (*Krapp's Last Tape*, *CSPlays*, p. 60)

The essentially autobiographical nature of the scene has been admitted by Beckett on various occasions.¹⁴ As Chapter 3 will argue, it is the attempt to shed light on the chaotic inner dark of the mind, by definition his own, but by virtue of his artistic pursuit that of the human mind and the conundrum of self that led Beckett on the long road to *Worstward Ho*.

Despite his pessimism about his lack of material, for which the language of the world is but a poor substitute, Beckett relentlessly continues his search for the nature of "being" in his entire post-war *oeuvre*. Schopenhauer will be seen to offer a clue to an understanding of Beckett's "obligation" to continue, as well as to the only ultimate solution to his doomed quest, which lies in the suspense of the conscious will.

In embracing his own inner dark like this, Beckett followed a Jungian psychoanalytic path. Chapter 4 examines what echoes may be heard in *Worstward Ho* of Beckett's interest in psychology, especially Jung's, and some of his other wide-ranging reading, including Plato and the Bible. Not only had Beckett undergone Jungian psychoanalysis in London in the 1930s, but he attended Jung's third

Tavistock lecture in 1935. The language of Krapp's remark about "the dark [he] ha[d] always struggled to keep under" is reminiscent of Jung:

Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other ... Both are aspects of life. Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too—as much of it as we can stand.¹⁵

There is no objective evidence in *Worstward Ho* that Beckett used his own memories. Yet certain images in the book are reminiscent of memories also included in earlier writings. It is as if in *Company* Beckett turns the moving film of his memories into stills, zooming in on, and blacking out, the stills in *Worstward Ho*. Like Joe in *Eh Joe* kills the voice in his head ("Mental thuggee you called it....One of your happiest fancies", *CSPlays*, p. 203), this is his way of ending it all. The three shades, for instance, are similar to images of the father, the mother and the child as they occur in *Company*, which has many autobiographical elements.¹⁶ The long walks in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains that Beckett took with his father, which feature so frequently in Beckett's work, may well have led to the fossilised memory of an old man and child plodding on as one:

Hand in hand with equal plod they go. In the free hands—no. Free empty hands. Backs turned both bowed with equal plod they go. The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held. Plod on and never recede. Slowly with never a pause plod on and never recede. (20.1–9)

Similarly, Beckett will often have observed his mother, a zealous Protestant, praying on her knees in the attitude of the kneeling woman in *Worstward Ho*. It is unlikely to be coincidence that these shades form, as it were, a trinity of male, female and child, representing literally a child and his parents or, in a Jungian sense, the archetypes of the narrator's self.

Again, the "head sunk on crippled hands" may well owe something to autobiography. Samuel Beckett was 75 when he wrote the book, and suffered from

arthritis of the right hand. In an autobiographical reading the title might reflect Beckett's own exhortation to continue his writing, more painful as his body showed increasing signs of aging.

In *Worstward Ho* Beckett's exploration of the mind's inner dark is expressed in bedrock language, carefully chiselled out of its minimal material. Yet this minimal material represents at the same time an unprecedented concentration. The just over 400 different words Beckett uses in *Worstward Ho* form a concentrated wordhoard built up over a period of more than seventy years and carry with them a wealth of allusions gathered from a life-time of reading. There are not only traces of European literary texts and themes ranging from Dante via the romantic poets to Joyce, but also allusions to mystical and philosophical writings. Chapter 4 discusses a number of these traces which, faint as they may be, still manage to stand out in the clarity of the narrator's logical reasoning.

"The danger is in the neatness of identifications", as Beckett wrote in the opening sentence of his essay on James Joyce's *Work in Progress* ("Dante ...", p. 19). In spite—and indeed also because—of its almost claustrophobic sense of closure, *Worstward Ho* invites a plurality of readings. Its insistent allusions, echoes, and connotations span the entire spectrum of human experience. *Worstward Ho* has the richness of poetry, but—as Beckett suggests in the same essay—"Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual". Yet, "[p]oets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity ... poetry is a prime condition of philosophy and civilization" (p. 24). In that sense *Worstward Ho* is perhaps most of all a synthesis—of these antithetical ways of writing, and of the many modes of thinking about the human mind and man's relationship to the world in which he lives.

Even though there is no overt textual evidence that Beckett incorporated any of the scientific theories that were being developed in his lifetime, Beckett was keenly interested in them.¹⁷ Shortly after the war, for example, Beckett obtained a copy of Erwin Schrödinger's quantum biology lectures, delivered at Trinity College, Dublin (*What Is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell*, Cambridge University Press, 1944), and gave it to his uncle Dr Gerald Beckett. Beckett's treatment of his subject of man's relationship to the world in which he lives (and his admission of failure to reach beyond what words may express) reflects what has since become recognised as the major transformation in twentieth-century atti-

tudes to the innate human urge to extend the boundaries of what is known and may be explained.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Marquis de Laplace argued that the universe was completely deterministic. Basing himself on Newton's laws, Laplace predicted that one day there would be a set of scientific laws to explain all processes in the universe, from the movements of the stars down to human behaviour. Among the first to challenge determinism systematically was Werner Heisenberg. In 1926, while working on the Quantum Theory (of which Schrödinger was one of the founders), Heisenberg formulated the uncertainty principle, which states that the more accurately one tries to measure the position of an object, the less accurately one can measure its speed and vice versa. In *A Brief History of Time* Stephen Hawking asserts that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle should be taken as "a fundamental, inescapable property of the world", with

profound implications for the way in which we view the world. Even after more than fifty years they have not been fully appreciated by many philosophers, and are still the subject of much controversy. The uncertainty principle signaled an end to Laplace's dream of a theory of science, a model of the universe that would be completely deterministic: one certainly cannot predict future events exactly if one cannot even measure the present state of the universe precisely!¹⁸ We could still imagine that there is a set of laws that determines events completely for some supernatural being, who could observe the present state of the universe without disturbing it. However, such models of the universe are not of much interest to us ordinary mortals. It seems better to employ the principle of economy known as Occam's razor and cut out all the features of the theory that cannot be observed.¹⁹

Chaos Theory, product of this half of the century's cultural climate, attempts to break what it regards as the stranglehold of conventional scientific thought even further. However, it does so only to search again for possible structures and regularities which had hitherto completely escaped notice, occurring as they do in a realm beyond conventional perception, and which had therefore been dismissed under the general nomenclature of chaos. Conventional descriptive methods were inadequate for predicting the newly perceived complexities. Therefore chaos theorists

developed new descriptive systems. Thus, despite its name, even this new theory, in fact, refuses to accept “chaos” and in looking for these new systems, succumbs to the human instinct for order and regularity. Some theorists have therefore re-named their field of investigation “complexity” instead of “chaos”.

Both Joyce and Beckett are usually regarded as modernists. This may be a convenient label in many respects, but it obscures how diametrically opposed their approach to writing really is. They find themselves on different sides of this twentieth-century watershed in the development of human thought. The strong sense of structure in Joyce’s work, and his deterministic tendency, suggest an essentially nineteenth-century positivist attitude. The *oeuvre* of James Joyce is often cited as a perfect example of organic growth, each new work appearing as the natural next stage in a development, expressing an inclusive world view that encompasses ever widening circles around its author’s life, culminating in *Finnegans Wake*. If any such development can be detected in Beckett’s work it is the reverse: a closing in rather than a branching out:

With Joyce the difference is that Joyce was a superb manipulator of material—perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn’t a syllable that’s superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material.

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is an achievement—must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art.

I think anyone nowadays, anybody who pays the slightest attention to his own experience, finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er.²⁰

What Beckett voices here is not just a personal opinion, but a realisation which he shares with scientific theorists of the second half of the twentieth century, *i.e.* that the complexities involved in seeking the answer to the question of what is life are such that we cannot be master of our material. In spite of his professed humility,

Worstward Ho belies Beckett's estimation of himself as a writer who was not master of his material. Along his different path, Beckett may be said to have achieved in *Worstward Ho* the same "savage economy of hieroglyphics" as he found in Joyce's *Work in Progress*—but in Beckett's case it is a "*Hieroglyphique* of silence".²¹

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

¹ That Beckett intended them to be thought of as a “trilogy” is unlikely (see the account of *Worstward Ho*’s publication history in the Introduction to Volume 1). Certainly a stronger sense of trinity suggests itself in a trilogy of *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Stirrings Still*, which are more firmly set in a recognizable world of some sort.

² The title is discussed in detail in Chapter 1, “Argument”, and Chapter 4, “Reverberations”.

³ The paragraph numbers, which, for their precision, are used in preference to page numbers, can be found in the text of *Worstward Ho* in Volume 1.

⁴ See “Never Dying” by Christopher Ricks, in *Beckett’s Dying Words*, OUP, 1993, pp. 24–32; Ricks names Swift, Milton and Dante as Beckett’s “great predecessors in imagining the horror of eternity”, but cf. also the long classical and christian tradition on the subject of the immortality of the soul (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the mystics Beckett was fond of, such as Eckhart, John of the Cross, Ruysbroeck).

⁵ For further interpretations of the setting, see the discussion on Plato in Chapter 4, “Reverberations”.

⁶ Beckett uses the phrase in *Whoroscope* (l. 73); in its form, it merges Descartes’ “cogito, ergo sum” with St Augustine’s “si enim fallor, sum” (*City of God*, Book 11, Chapter 26). Descartes phrased his own version of Augustine’s thought in the second of his *Meditations on the First Philosophy* thus: “Haud dubie igitur ego etiam sum, si me fallit”.

⁷ Beckett is perhaps less than any other writer concerned about establishing a relationship between himself and his audience. There is a connection between him and his writing; there is one between his writing and his readers: but there is no direct link between him and his readers.

⁸ Beckett himself presents many arguments against a fictional reading. As he has *Ill Seen Ill Said*’s narrator think in exasperation, “If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be” (p. 20).

⁹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, 1996, p. 677.

¹⁰ The texts of the draft versions presented in parallel in Volume 1 show the extent of Beckett’s painstaking efforts to achieve that concentration.

¹¹ Cf. “[T]he writing of, say, Racine or Malherbe, perpendicular, diamanté, is pitted, is it not, and sprigged with sparkles; the flints and pebbles are there, no end of humble tags and commonplaces. They have no style, they write without style, do they not, they give you the phrase, the sparkle, the precious margaret. Perhaps only the French can do it. Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want.” (*Dream*, p. 48).

¹² “[Beckett] is writing in English these days [1977], because that has become the foreign language to him” (Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, ed. A. van der Weel and R. Hisgen, Leiden, 1995, pp. 165–66).

¹³ Ludovic Janvier, *Beckett par lui-même*, Paris, 1969, p. 20.

¹⁴ See for example Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, pp. 351–53.

¹⁵ Jung, *Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation*, 1939, p. 288, quoted in *From Freud to Jung: A Comparative Study of the Psychology of the Unconscious*, by Liliane Frey-Rohn, Boston, Mass, 1974, p. 112.

¹⁶ See Eoin O’Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett’s Ireland*, Dublin, 1986, for a survey of the many autobiographical elements in Beckett’s work.

¹⁷ See John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, London, 1976, p. 131. Gordon Armstrong (in “Cultural Politics and the Irish Theatre: Samuel Beckett and the New Biology”, *Theatre Research International*, Vol.

18, No. 3, pp. 215–21) confirms that Beckett was keenly interested in Schrödinger's theory of quantum physics (which describes the unfolding of events as an undulating wave of possibilities rather in terms of Newtonian certainties). Armstrong relates: "In a conversation with me in 1985, Beckett acknowledged with a wry grin the importance of Schrodinger's [sic] small oracle to his work" (p. 215).

¹⁸ As Beckett formulated this idea in "What Is the Word": "folly seeing all this this here ... for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what".

¹⁹ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York, 1989, p. 59.

²⁰ Interview with Samuel Beckett by Israel Shenker, *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, repr. in *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Silvester, Viking/Penguin, 1993, pp. 385–88, on 387–88.

²¹ *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols, Berkeley, 1953–1982, Vol. 7, p. 366.

Chapter 1

ARGUMENT

Though *Worstward Ho*, Samuel Beckett's last book-length narrative, can be regarded as the culmination of a coherent *oeuvre* spanning more than half a century, it stands at the same time apart from it. By common consent, *Worstward Ho* is the most hermetic of Beckett's longer prose works. In view of the difficulty of the text, this chapter proposes to discuss some approaches to reading *Worstward Ho*. It will first examine the book's title and then proceed to discuss *Worstward Ho* quite conventionally as a (fictional) narrative, looking at plot, setting, narrator, narrative technique, character and characterization as one would at any prose fiction. The narrative is examined in some depth by tracing the development of a number of the text's key words and concepts: "on"; "say" and "see"; "mind"; "dim" and "void"; "worsen", and shade one, the body, as they contribute to the text's narrative development. By discussing the book in terms of conventional narrative elements, its unconventional character reveals itself clearly; it is not satisfactory to read *Worstward Ho* purely as a work of fiction. An analysis of form and function of one of the most obvious characteristics of the book's peculiar style, its obsessive rationality, leads to the conclusion that this text differs from conventional narratives in that its course is determined by a carefully structured argument as much as by its story-line.

THE TITLE

Even a superficial study of the various titles in Beckett's *oeuvre*, will make it clear that Beckett did not choose his titles frivolously. As Steven Connor points out in *Samuel Beckett, Repetition, Theory and Text*¹ Beckett sometimes attempted to name the entire text (*Watt*, *Molloy*, *The Unnamable*), sometimes chose to interpret the text metaphorically (*First Love*, *The Expelled*), sometimes selected words or phrases from the body of the text (*That Time*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*) or favourite phrases from other texts (*Come and Go*) and he even chose simple generic titles (*Film*, *Play*), "which offer interpretations of the texts they name". According to Connor, in his later writings Beckett as a general rule chooses "quoting" titles (repeating a text of

his own) rather than “naming” titles. *Worstward Ho* is considered an exception to this general rule. Most critics² agree that this title stands firmly outside the text, commenting ironically on it. But is that indeed the case? “Worstward ho” may not appear to be a literal reference to any words in the body of the text, but there is nevertheless a strong nexus between title and text. Several critics have dismissed the title as some kind of jocular or ironic comment on the text. There is no evidence that Beckett’s sense of humour was declining at the period in his life when he was writing *Worstward Ho*, but at no stage of his life was Beckett given to word play for its own sake, and the title is certainly a great deal more than “a terrible pun”.³ Beckett’s idiosyncratic coinage has led critics to cast a wide net for possible sources. However, the rich catch has on the whole been examined only cursorily for its relevance to the text itself. The following discussion will attempt to remedy this.

Though the actual words “worstward ho” do not occur in their literal meaning of “on, in the worst direction” in the body of the text, yet there is one arrestingly cognate phrase, which occurs only once: “So leastward on” (64.1). That the direction to a state of ‘least’ would also lead to the best, and so the worst, state (identical in the text) is made clear in the same paragraph:

So leastward on. ... To dimmest dim. Leastmost in dimmest dim. Utmost dim.
Leastmost in utmost dim. Unworsenable worst. (64.1, 5–9)

The narrator’s sense that he is on the right track is anticipated a few paragraphs earlier where he decides that it is not absolute nothingness (“naught”) that will be the preferred outcome of his mental struggles, but rather a situation in which everything is reduced to the least possible state before the final moment:

Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worse. Unlessenable least best worse. (61.10–22)

“So leastward on” can be regarded as almost synonymous with the “worstward ho” of the title. To clinch this interpretation, it may be noted that in his revision

of typescript D Beckett changed the phrase “So leastward on” to “So leastward ho”. Why he chose to revert back to “So leastward on” in the final typescript is matter for speculation. Was it, perhaps, an oversight, or was the correction ignored on purpose? An investigation of what this subtle change would have meant to the text leads one to suspect the latter. The phrase summarises the entire process of the text and therefore occupies a significant position in the text. Had Beckett decided to change “on” to the archaic “ho”, the phrase might have received too much emphasis, especially in view of the loud echo of the title. The weight would have threatened the flow of the text.

Alternatively, it is also conceivable that inserting the word “ho” was connected with the same flash of inspiration that led to the book’s present title. If so, Beckett may have decided that such a pun should be used only once.⁴

As all critics of the book agree, the first and foremost interpretation of the meaning of the title that comes to mind is that it is an exhortation to the reader to join the narrator on his journey towards “worst” and “best”. At the end of the book the shades are “At bounds of boundless void. Whence no farther. Best worse no farther” (95.10–12). Beckett in the text apparently plays—as he does often—at making extremes meet, or as he said with reference to Giordano Bruno: “The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent. Minimal heat equals minimal cold. Consequently transmutations are circular.”⁵ In this sense it could be said that maximum best equals maximum worst.

The Shakespearean echo in the title, from Edgar’s speech in *King Lear*, has of course been remarked by most critics. Despite his miserable condition Edgar draws hope from the realisation that things are always capable of becoming worse than they are:

O gods! Who is’t can say “I am at the worst”?
I am worse than e’er I was. ...
And worse I may be yet: the worst is not
So long as we can say “This is the worst.” (IV.i.27–30)

That this is no idle speculation is proved by the fact that Beckett took down three quotes from the first thirty lines of Act IV, Scene i of *King Lear* in a little notebook in 1979–1980, shortly before he began work on *Worstward Ho*.⁶ The scene opens

with Edgar consciously playing on the similarity between better and worse and best and worst:

Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,
 Than still contemn'd and flatter'd. To be worst,
 The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
 Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear:
 The lamentable change is from the best:
 The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then,
 Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!
 The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
 Owes nothing to thy blasts. (IV.i.1-9)

“Better thus” refers to his present condition, which, as he says a moment later, is “worse than e’er [it] was”. The speech pivots around the idea that there comes a point in the process of things becoming ever worse where “the worst returns to laughter”. In other words, *les extrêmes se touchent*.

Beckett used not only the theme, but almost the very words of the speech, for the opening poem in his *Mirlitonnades*, many of which Beckett first jotted down in the same *sottisier*:

en face
 le pire
 jusqu’à ce
 qu’il fasse rire⁷

In *Worstward Ho* the narrator constantly refers to his desire to “worsen” his mental constructs. The worst—which the text identifies with “best” through such phrases as “better worse”—he can do to these constructs is the achievement of the stage of “nohow on”. “Nohow on” signals the end of the mental process itself. After “nohow on” nothing more is thinkable or sayable by the narrator: the closest to nothing (the full annihilation of self) he can get. The narrator hopes, however, that he will be able to achieve a moment of just sufficient remaining awareness to enjoy the moment before true nothingness, or total annihilation: “Just

enough still to joy” (57.7). In other words, the aim must be to achieve least, or a maximum of void, rather than total nothingness. Reduction of the number of shades is not an option; though their relationship is never spelled out, the shades are intuitively apprehended as an indivisible trinity that make up the narrator’s self: male, female and child.⁸ The minimum of something, or the maximum of void, is the images of the three “shades” in pinpoint size achieved at the end of the book.⁹

Beyond its literal meaning, the title can also be read in many other ways, for example as the homophonic phrase “worst word ho”.¹⁰ Beckett repeatedly demonstrates a certain fondness for significant homophones in *Worstward Ho*, in evidence also in earlier texts.¹¹ An example of a particular homophone highly relevant in the context of Beckett’s *oeuvre* (especially in *Worstward Ho* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*) is the use of the homophones “know” and “no” in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. “Know happiness” (p. 59) suggests that the knowledge of happiness is identical with the absence of happiness. In *Worstward Ho* this paradox is echoed at a moment in the text when the narrator looks forward to the joyful revelation to be experienced when his last remains of mind recognise the arrival of the last moment before nothingness, when he will have the satisfaction to know that there will be no more mind and no more words. The phrases “No mind and words? Even such words” (57.4–5) suggest that the imminent absence of mind and words must be accompanied by a lingering knowledge of mind and words, “just enough still to joy”. Similarly “worstward ho”, the progress to the worst, also implies the progress to the worst word, “nohow on”, which in the context means the best achievement.¹²

WORSTWARD HO AS FICTION

Despite the novelesque journey metaphor implicit in the title, there is not, on the face of it, much in *Worstward Ho* that will put the reader instantly in mind of narrative fiction. Not only are direct links with the real world lacking, but the narrator asks the reader to accept narrative developments that are not in accord with his experience of the world: a movement of going without receding, or the “worsening” process in which a head with two eyes turns into a skull with one hole without any physical explanation. There is no psychological substratum, as we tend to expect of narrative fiction (what Andrew Renton calls “motivational

flesh”),¹³ nor is there much in the way of plot. *Worstward Ho* is almost entirely a simple chronological recounting of events as they happen. The largest narrative structure in *Worstward Ho* is that of the “worsening” process: the two-directional movement from nothing to a minimal something and back again to nothing. There are thus two phases, one an expanding movement, and the other a contracting one. The first phase runs from section 1 to 38. It introduces the subjects of the narrative one by one, with the introduction of the first of them, the “body”, starting the narrative itself. The subjects are three shades and a place for them to be in. The second phase, that of reduction, starts in 39 with the narrator embarking on the process of reducing the subjects he has introduced in phase one to their minimal state.

The worsening process in *Worstward Ho* is a thought-process: a chain of thoughts and images called up to the mind of the narrator. In this process the narrator mentally manipulates a series of dim black-and-white images, and accompanies it by a running interpretation. Once the thought process has been set in motion the first narrative event to take place is the appearance of a body, the first shade. Shortly after two more follow. After a period of observation the narrator sets out to “worsen” them. This is a process which generally involves lessening. In the case of the shades this is done by “zooming in” on them (i.e. imagining a smaller part of them to be visible). The worsening process also, in a way, affects the words. In paragraph 56 a proposal is made to replace “dim”, “void” and “shades” by the word “they”. In so doing these key words would lose all that, in a verbal universe, distinguishes them: a distinct orthography and the meaning assigned them by convention. But the decision is not carried through. The dim light and the void themselves cannot be worsened, except that they are perceived more dimly while words are being produced than in the blank spaces between them.

The end result of this process of worsening is that the shades are all seen together with great clarity though reduced to almost abstract featureless shapes. The final vision is that of the shades as three pins and a pinhole in a universe which is completely void except for this one constellation: three dim stars and a black hole. The contents of the narrator’s mind have been reduced to their most compacted state. This state cannot be further worsened because it cannot be further reduced. The narrator recognises this as the point at which there is no way to go on, and ends the narrative, leaving the reader wondering whether this black hole will

eventually suck up the three stars. Any more words at this point would counteract the achievement of the desired dissociation of the self from the world.

To this larger twofold structure of expansion and reduction some refinements can be added. The book opens with a two-paragraph prolegomenon (1–2).¹⁴ It introduces the book's main theme: "Somehow on. Till nohow on" (1.4–5), and a narrative convention the narrator is to use: "say for be said" (2.3), in other words the act of saying something is equated with the coming into being of that thing. The "creation" proper takes place in 3–21. In 39 the worsening process begins.¹⁵

The transition from the expansive to the reductive phase is prepared for by 35–38, when the narrator exclaims that there is much room for worsening. It is introduced by the exclamation "Enough":

Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse. Pending worse still. (39.8–12)

This recalls for the first time the title's invitation to come on a journey towards worst. Once begun, the worsening process (39–96) is frequently interrupted by speculations, characterizations etc.

All through the text the narrator argues (with oozing and gnawing words) his worstward way. However much the narrator tries to empty his mind of words and images, he does not succeed in making them go. While the reader, accompanying the narrator on this worstward journey, will experience the succession of words and blanks as one continuous and logical stream of narration, the reader is in fact not party to what goes on during the "blanks", since there are no words to convey the narrator's visual experience. When the words are "on" again and the narrator digests what was seen, the reader is allowed to catch a glimpse. There are therefore some unexpected surprises. At the beginning of the text, a number of figments, which the narrator calls "shades", appear suddenly. Later on, these shades disappear and reappear without changing. In the middle of the process of the shades being worsened, the narrator surprises the reader by saying that the first shade is an old woman, even though there is no indication of how the narrator knows. At the end of the worsening process, the narrator describes a sudden and unexpected change of perspective, when the three shades are suddenly all clearly within the field of sight even though they are "vastly apart". This last, unexpected and sudden change occurs just before the end of the book, and may be suspected to herald it.

In paragraph 93 the narrator hints that he is aware that the end of his quest is near. When the three stooped shades (the four figures) are all within his scope for the first time, he remarks: "Such last state. Latest state." (93) In the following paragraph he focuses on the skull with the eyeless black hole and the last remnant of the softened intellect. The reader arriving at the penultimate paragraph of the text, experiences a sudden leap in the narrator's point of view. All shades are here in their least state, so far removed from the observer that the narrator suggests that they could not have gone any further. The significance of this sudden change of perspective in the light of Beckett's larger themes is more fully explored in Chapter 3, "Roots".

NARRATOR

Having said that there is a narrator, it must also be noted that less is known about the narrator than in any previous Beckett text. While we know next to nothing about the whereabouts, history, etc. of the *Texts for Nothing* narrators, they at least identify themselves as the narrator, through the use of the personal pronoun "I". In *Worstward Ho* the narrator is not overtly present. The answer to his question "whose words [are the words that are being spoken]?" is "no words for *it* [emphasis added] whose words". The language offers no clues. No first or second person pronouns are used at all. Nor does the form of the verb offer any clue. The most common verb form is "say", and it is not clear whether it is used as an infinitive,¹⁶ an imperative, or a finite form of the verb to match an elided personal pronoun, such as I or you. The same goes for most other verb forms. Only the occurrence of "be" could be used as evidence to eliminate the third possibility; but then there is no certainty that any uniformity of usage was intended. A remark Beckett made in an interview in 1975 is illuminating: "Finally one no longer knows who is speaking. The subject disappears completely. That's where the crisis of identity ends."¹⁷

About his character we learn no more than we can deduce from the nature of his narrative. Man or woman, he generally uses his intellect to reason his way forward; but this process of intellection is interrupted by mental steps which are not dictated by reason but by emotion, as in

... First try fail better one. Something there badly not wrong. Not that at is it is

not bad. The no face bad. The no hands bad. The no—. Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. (39)

His narrative moves forward in short sections interrupted by pauses; each section consists of short breathless phrases. The subject of his discourse is unusual, and the narrative is difficult to follow for that reason. But in addition, the narrator uses a peculiar kind of English. Phrases such as “Say the night is young alas and take heart” (38); “Gain time to lose. As the soul once. The world once” (36); and the many poetic elements in his use of language (such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance) leads one to suspect that the narrator has a sense of literary expression and a metaphysical bent. At no point in the book can his diction, grammar and syntax be clearly ascribed to any historical period. But contemporary words are absent, and the narrator appears to have a preference for Anglo-Saxon (non-latinate) monosyllabic words and idiosyncratically formed words. His attitude to language is ambivalent: on the one hand he is obviously fond of words and the mechanisms of language (punning), on the other hand he makes use of an extremely limited vocabulary. Since the narrator expresses his profound wish to be rid of all longing, it may be assumed that he is by nature an ascetic. Yet he treats his pursuit with a sense of irony, witness a comment like “No future in this. Alas yes” (11.1–2).

In some respects the narrator is unusual (the extremely limited and peculiar vocabulary; the highly elliptical style; the difficulty of linguistically dating his utterances; the subject of his narrative), but there is nothing that would appear to contradict the assumption that he is an ordinary human being. Some of these findings might be explained quite simply by the fact that the narrator does not appear to be directing his words to anyone. He may be talking to himself, or thinking; in either case, he would be in a position not to have to please anyone but himself.

One is led to conclude from these findings that there is no effort on Beckett’s part to introduce a conventional fictionalised narrator. Until 33—but more clearly in 43—there is, in fact, no indication that the voice speaking is not the author’s. In 33 the head is identified as the source of everything, including therefore the head itself, and the entire narrative. Since the head, from which the narrative originates, rests “on crippled hands”, the narrator may be thought to be an old person, suffering from, for example, arthritis. It is tempting to identify the narrator with Beckett

the author; in fact, Beckett appears to be at pains in *Worstward Ho*, as in much of his earlier fiction, to minimise any discrepancy between author and narrator.¹⁸ Though identification between author and narrator is strongly suggested in much of Beckett's postwar fiction, precisely for this reason the conventional critical practice of making a distinction between the author and the first person narrator offers an advantageous critical perspective.

The narrator's main characteristic is probably his tenacity of purpose. Despite the difficulties, he persists in his quest to stop all mental activity. He is capable of sufficient mental discipline to continue the worsening process and to achieve his goal. His method is a rational one, and he rarely betrays his emotions. It is, however, worth noting that what emotional moments occur in the text also identify significant moments in the larger narrative structure. The outburst "Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse" at 39 signals the beginning of the reductionist phase in the narrative; the emotional paragraph 92 heralds the revelatory epiphany of the end of the book.

The narrative perspective remains that of the narrator's mind throughout. However, the circularity introduced in 33 causes a surprising twist. The appellation "Seat of all. Germ of all" is assigned to the head when it is first introduced in 10. But only in 33 the implication of the phrase is realised: because the head is the source of the narrative, it is also the seat and germ of itself, the "scene and seer of all" (45). That is to say that along with shades one and two, the void and the dim light, the narrator also imagines seeing himself as the head within his own head. In this way his inner head appears within his outer head, as a "shade with the other shades" (33). All the shades, the dim light and the void are from this moment on described as being in the head. They are thus figments in the imagination (mind) of the outer head, despite the fact that the (outer) head first appears in the book in exactly the same way as shades one and two, i.e. as a figment. By implication, the head (shade three) also worsens itself.

Consequently at any one time the narrative perspective can be one of two: that of the head at the hierarchical level of the deviser of it all, and that of the head as devised by the head. That this is no mere theoretical possibility is indicated in 41:

First back on to three. Not yet to try worsen. Simply be there again. There in that head in that head. Be it again. That head in that head. (41.1-6)

Beckett employs a number of narrative techniques in *Worstward Ho*. The entire text consists of a single monologue, without authorial intervention.¹⁹ This monologue is characterised by the sort of relentless rationality that characterises so many of Beckett's narrators. Because *Worstward Ho*'s narrative development is almost exclusively driven by this extreme rationality, it will be treated separately below.

Though there are no characters in the strict sense of the word, the following play an important role in the narrative: the shades, the dim, the void, the words and the blanks. Their importance is also indicated by the fact that in the margins of the second TS (of RUL MS 2602) Beckett has identified them as the main subject of a number of paragraphs by adding their initials in red capital letters.

The three shades in *Worstward Ho* are the figments of the narrator's imagination, and lack any life of their own. They appear, only to be submitted to a relentless process of reduction. The narrator does not assign to them any characteristics beyond those of their external appearance. They passively undergo the manipulations of the narrator throughout the text, and resemble conventional human subjects only to the extent that they are described in terms of physical characteristics that are recognizably human. Their actions are restricted to a limited array of physical movements; psychological motivation plays no part. Rather than calling them characters, "figures" might be a better term for what the narrator calls "shades": in the order of their appearance, a body, a head, and a couple of figures. They are referred to as shade one, two and three respectively. The body is first imagined standing up; later kneeling. It will turn out to be that of a woman. The couple, one big, one small, are holding hands as they are seen "plodding on" —without, however, ever actually making progress. The head, which rests on crippled hands, is called "the seat and germ of all", from which it logically follows that it is the narrator's own head, which he imagines seeing from the outside (in the same way as the narrator of *Stirrings Still* sees himself rise and go).

The relationship of the shade referred to as the head to the other shades (old woman, old man and child) becomes fully clear only after the head has been identified as the deviser of everything (it is the "seat and germ of all") or, in other words, as the *alter ego* of the narrator (see the discussion on the mind below). Though no evidence is given for any relations between the remaining two shades (old woman, old man and child) they suggest some sort of trinity, such as mother, father and child.²⁰

In addition, as was suggested above, the dim, the void, the words and the blanks may to some extent be regarded as “characters” in the sense that they are among the “objects” central to the narrative concern. Compared to the shades they are much more intractable, having, if that is not too misleading a way to express the situation, more or less a life of their own. The void resists all of the narrator’s attempts at worsening and it cannot go until all goes for good. The dim, too, can only go if it goes for good. If it seems to become “worse” somehow, the narrator is not sure what that entails; his efforts are at any rate not directly aimed at achieving a worsening of the dim.

The dim light (abbreviated to “the dim” or “dim”) is the light, by which everything else can be made out. Its source is unknown, in which it resembles so much “faint light” in Beckett’s work. The dim light is a permanent phenomenon: it cannot go, unless “all” goes, which would be for good. A further attribute of the dim light is its ubiquity: it reaches everywhere. Words have the effect of further dimming the dim light, and everything in it.

The void is the nothingness which surrounds the shades: the narrow field wherever the eyes of the head stare, far and wide, high and low. It has in common with the dim that it cannot go away, unless it goes for good, which is when everything goes. Otherwise it is unchanging: it never becomes more, never less, never worse. More than anything else in the text the void harbours paradoxes: it is at the same time everything and nothing, narrow and vast, boundless and bounded.

To regard the words as a “character” too, as the text certainly invites us to do,²¹ offers insight into the nature of *Worstward Ho* at the same time as it complicates any discussion of it. The words as we read them are of course primarily the conventional medium of the text as they are the medium of any text. However, in the absence of an identifiable narrator, and in the face of such phrases as “words whose unknown”, the words must also be regarded to some extent as autonomous agents. They seem to be able to act independently of the narrator’s will, floating up from the subconscious to the passive receptacle of the conscious mind. This is by no means unique in Beckett’s *oeuvre*. In *Watt* there are many indications that its narrator experiences something similar, for example:

In his skull the voices whispering their canon were like a patter of mice, a flurry of little grey paws in the dust. (p. 231)

The narrators in the *Texts for Nothing* repeatedly mention voices which force themselves on them, as in Text XIII:

Whose voice, no one's, there is no one, there's a voice without a mouth, and somewhere a kind of hearing, something compelled to hear. (p. 113)

The phenomenon is consummately expressed in *Eh Joe*, whose main character, Joe, is actively trying to kill the words of a dead woman that invade his mind. In an interview, Beckett stressed the autonomy of the woman's words and the passiveness of Joe's mind: "She really is whispering inside his head. He [can] hear her. Only if she is a living being can he have the wish to kill her. She is dead, but for him she is still living. That is his passion: to kill those voices which he cannot kill."²²

The two functions of the words, as conventional text and autonomous agents, merge in *Worstward Ho* and it is not always possible to identify the status of any given piece of text with certainty. When the narrator wonders who speaks the words that are spoken, the question and answer form may be taken to be either a dialogue between a conscious and an unconscious mental voice, or a monologue with the conscious voice interrupting itself, using the dialogue form only to stop his thoughts from straying:

Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so.

It is not until later in the book (68) that it is stated more or less explicitly that the words do indeed come from the head, which is after all the "seat and germ of all": "Oozed from softening soft the word woman's". Even then, the activity is described as passive, which seems to sit oddly with the active pursuit of reasoning. Two tentative explanations suggest themselves. If the words are taken to come from the narrator's unconscious, it would have to be regarded as a rational agent. Alternatively, the rational inquiry could be taken to occur in the author's mind, the author using the narrator as his will-less vessel, much like the voice in *Text for Nothing* IV:

He has me say things saying it's not me, there's profundity for you, he has me who say nothing say it's not me. All that is truly crass. If at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments... (p. 82)

There are some further characteristics of the words. The words are in need of worsening ("room for worse"); they are not inane enough. Words dim perception, which is to say that vision is sharper when there are no words: cf. the camera which moves only while there is silence in *Eh Joe*; Mr Rooney in *All That Fall* who cannot move and speak at the same time.

The blanks are unlike the other characters in that neither are they agents, nor does anything happen to them. They appear to be simply the silences which are a necessary complement to the words as spoken by the narrator. They are so in the *Texts for Nothing*:

Words, [my life] was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words. (*TfN* VI, p. 91)

Being identical with the typographical blank space, the blanks can be said to be fully iconic. The words stop during these blanks, though seeing does not. "Blanks" appear in *How It Is* and *Watt* in the same iconic way: in *Watt* on p. 231 (where the narrative is broken while Watt ceases to think) and probably also on p. 237 (where the narrative is broken while Watt is unconscious).²³

SETTING

The setting in *Worstward Ho* is unusually minimal. There are no clues to a specific time in past, present or future, and "the place" is a virtually featureless void. This is the result of the attempt to ban references to the real world outside the text as much as possible. When the Unnamable attempts to describe his unidentified abode he finds the "words of the world" inadequate for his task: "I who am so good at describing places, walls, ceilings, floors, they are my speciality, doors, windows, what haven't I imagined in the way of windows in the course of my career ... nothing but the four surfaces, the six surfaces ..." (*The Unnamable*, p. 117). Yet even by calling them inadequate he still invites comparison with the real world; *Worstward Ho* avoids such comparisons at all cost.

There is no way of measuring temporal progression in *Worstward Ho*. The many references to time in the text are in fact equally many red herrings: they do not link up with measurable time in any way, not even through fictional means. No instruments to measure time are to be found in *Worstward Ho*, and even day and night are indistinguishable since the dim light is at all times and in all places of the same intensity. Thus, the outside world's notion of time, which measures seconds, minutes, hours (and cries in *Stirrings Still*), is absent from the world of *Worstward Ho*.²⁴

This timeless and placeless quality of the work does, of course, invite speculation. The void as a setting suggests both timelessness and boundlessness. The subject of the narrator's story is introduced as being "all of old": there is nothing new under the sun, or rather under his dim light. However, from a narrative point of view real timelessness is not possible. With his mind longing for nothingness the narrator is keen to reason away the familiar and meaningful things that are still preying on his mind: the four characters that make up the three shades, and the words, but also all feelings that would prolong his mental activities. The word "prolong" suggests that there is time and that there is a destiny which is separated from the narrator's present situation by time. Indeed, the text itself is evidence that there must be some kind of temporal progression such as the one experienced in the material world. Each new element in a sequence like

First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other (5.3–7)

is triggered by a time indicator: "first" or "now". The sheer volume of words indicating time in *Worstward Ho* is phenomenal. When the narrator decides to refer to the shades by means of numbers—as he says (in 36), in order to gain time—his narration implicitly relates to time as used in the temporal world. In actual fact, however, almost all indications of time, like "first" or "now", refer to narrative time only. And even when "world time" is used, the narrator is able to manipulate it narratively in the same way as he manipulates everything else, by simply "saying":

Say the night is young alas and take heart. Or better worse say still a watch of night alas to come. A rest of last watch to come. And take heart. (38.5–8)

In 76 the narrator recognises that his temporal mental activities are set against the timeless dimensions of the mental space which the skull's eyes are staring at:

No once. No once in pastless now. No not none. When before the shades?
The dim before more? When if not once? Onceless alone the void. By no
stretch more. By none less. Onceless till no more.

Onceless, pastless (and thus presumably) futureless, it might be said more aptly that the void is *beyond* time. His own time, the narrator speculates in 60, must come to a halt when everything is gone from the skull and there is no way the mental activities can go on, because they have nothing to go on with:

All gone when nohow on. Time gone when nohow on.

In the void, which is an eternal presence, there is a voice evoking temporal images and reasoning its way to a situation in which the illusion of time and self will come to a halt, when there will be “nohow on”, no way to go on.

In this “place” of void, which is boundless and beyondless, the narrator continues the mind's activities until they come to a halt, without any stimuli from the world outside the text. The shades that come to his mind can be interpreted as long worn images retrieved from memory. Since the entire narrative consists of a thought process, the narrator's mind is a likely candidate for the “place”. Indeed, the interpretation of the limitless void lit by a dim light as the mind makes good sense. Being immaterial, the mind can be said to be naturally void; its limitlessness is an image for the unlimited potential of the mind to range “Far and wide. High and low”, even though in actual fact the dim light of reason never reaches beyond “That narrow field”.

In manuscript B of *Worstward Ho* what are later to be called “shades” are still referred to as shadows, and the phrase “shadow theatre” is used to refer to the setting where they appear. This is later replaced by “Seat of all. Germ of all”. The shadow theatre, in other words, is the mind.²⁵ If *Worstward Ho* were to be transformed into a text for the theatre, enormous problems would present themselves especially with respect to creating a stage image. The setting of *Worstward Ho* is without dimensions: it is a place without a ceiling or floor, without walls or win-

dows. Without light, however dim, a shadow theatre cannot exist. Throughout the “play” the stage has been lit by the dimmest of light. The dim light is so dim that colours are restricted to dim white and dim black (26). Its source always remains a mystery. The narrator directs and observes the proceedings on this dimensionless stage. The stage, initially called a “place”, is consistently referred to as the void. Somewhere on this boundless stage three shades (four characters) appear when he calls them: a body, an old man together with a child, and a head. Halfway through the proceedings, the narrator discovers to his own surprise that he is not only off the stage commenting on the characters on the stage, but that he is actually one of the characters himself: the head, “scene and seer of all”. The narrator directs the various shades (like the director in *Catastrophe*), manipulating them in turn, until they appear in their minimal and what he regards as their most desirable form. These continuing shifts of focus, with “stage directions” intended for one shade at the time only, prevent the observer from achieving a clear survey of what the narrator calls “the narrow field” or “the narrow void” (which is only ever that part of the limitless stage where attention is being focused at any one time), let alone of the void as a whole. Not until the narrator-director has reduced the shades to their least states is he able to view them all together clearly in “the whole narrow void”. At that moment his view widens to encompass the entire void which makes up the stage. In this overall view of the boundless stage the various shades are seen in their proper, “utmost least”, proportions, i.e. at the bounds of the boundless void.

Enoch Brater also adopts this perspective of *Worstward Ho*’s setting as a stage production in his critical discussion of the later prose in *The Drama in the Text*:²⁶

There is indeed a drama to these little texts, one that looks, at first “aperçu,” very much like the Beckett we recognize in the theater. Fiction and drama, theatricality and textuality, seem to come together here. When he wrote *A Piece of Monologue*, for example, the playwright told the actor David Warrilow that he wasn’t even sure if he had written a play or a piece of prose. (p. 12)

Dramatic though *Worstward Ho* undoubtedly is, there are numerous narrative developments for which the stage metaphor falls short. Zooming in and out and sudden changes of perspective are techniques which are more reminiscent of film:

They fade. Now the one. Now the twain. Now both. Fade back. Now the one. Now the twain. Now both. Fade? No. Sudden go. Sudden back. Now the one. Now the twain. Now both. (22)

Much of the text can be read as the description of a scene filmed by a camera. The stare functions as a camera recording the various shades against the background of the void in the dim light:

The stare. Alone in the dim void. Alone to be seen. Dimly seen. In the skull the skull alone to be seen. The staring eyes. Dimly seen. By the staring eyes. The others gone. Long sudden gone. Then sudden back. Unchanged. Say now unchanged. First one. Then two. Or first two. Then one. Or together. Then all again together. The bowed back. The plodding twain. The skull. The stare. All back in the skull together. Unchanged. Stare clamped to all. In the dim void. (50.16–42)

This scene, in which the eyes are observed by themselves, shows a remarkable similarity to the final scene in the only film script that Beckett wrote for the screen: *Film*. In the following quotation from the film script O is the Object of the film (the old man) and E is the Eye (the camera). The quotation starts when the old man has finally gone to sleep in his rocking chair, while the camera is trying to snatch a facial view of the man, whom we so far have seen from behind.

E's gaze pierces the sleep, O starts awake, stares up at E. Patch over O's left eye now seen for the first time. Rock revived by start, stilled at once by foot to ground. Hand clutches armrests. O half starts from chair, then stiffens, staring up at E. Gradually that look. Cut to E, of whom this very first image (face only, against ground of tattered wall). It is O's face (with patch) but with very different expression, impossible to describe, neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute *intentness*. [...] Long image of the unblinking gaze. (*Film*, *CSPlays*, p. 169)

In his general notes to *Film*, Beckett states that “it will not be clear until end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self” (p. 163). This identification between perceiver and perceived is also at the heart of *Worstward Ho*.

KEY CONCEPTS

A discussion of *Worstward Ho* as a narrative text brings up a number of interesting observations, not the least pertinent being that the book yields itself to such a conventional approach only to a limited extent. The following section discusses *Worstward Ho*'s narrative development by focusing on some of the text's own key terms and concepts: "on"; "say" and "see"; the mind and its various incarnations, culminating in the appellation "worst why of all of all"; the "dim" and "void"; the process of worsening; and the transformation of the body.

On

At a first glance the text suggests circularity. The book begins and ends with the word "on" (and thus opens with the circular letter "o"). But in fact, the anticipated act of regeneration does not occur. The "on" at the end of the book is qualified by "nohow", and the ending expresses finality rather than circularity. "On", the first word of the text, can be read as a sequel to the title's incentive, "worstward ho". In conjunction with "worstward ho", "on" can thus be interpreted as "let's go, or continue, on our way to the place or situation which is worst". Although the book begins and ends with "on", and *on* is one of the most frequently used words in the text (it occurs 103 times, making it the fourth-most frequent word after *the* [144], *say* [122] and *no* [112]), the narrator's desire is in fact for the opposite. Through the use of "at long last" in 46 the narrator implicitly expresses a desire for "on" to cease:

On. Stare on. Say on. Be on. Somehow on. Anyhow on. Till dim gone. At long last gone. All at long last gone. For bad and all. For poor best worse and all.

In other words, "on" continues till "all gone". From this it may be recognised retrospectively that the desire for "on" to cease had already been expressed, and with a little more emotion, in 34: "Oh dim go. Go for good. All for good. Good and all" because, as the reader now knows, for all to go for good means the end of "on". Closer to the end the narrator spells it out in no uncertain terms: "Gnawing to be gone. Less no good. Worse no good. Only one good. Gone. Gone for good. Till then gnaw on." (84). In 60 the new element of time is added to this equation: "All gone when nohow on. Time gone when nohow on" (60). At the end of the

text, then, the worst/best situation has been achieved when there is “nohow on” and time is gone.²⁷

Say and see

“See” in *Worstward Ho* passively records the developments of the creation and worsening process, whereas “say” has a more active function, influencing the course of the narrative. “Say” functions as a first cause. It creates and manipulates without itself changing. “Say” in *Worstward Ho* is thus very similar in meaning to the Biblical one, as in, for instance, Genesis 1:26: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” The causal connection between His saying and the resulting being is one of God’s inscrutable mysteries.²⁸ If this parallel is taken further, “see” represents the result of what was divinely spoken: “And God saw the light”. The phrase “Say a body” could read: “The mind says, let there be a body: and there is a body. And the mind sees the body.”

The first word of the text, “on”, is modified in the second sentence by the second word, “say”. The activeness of this utterance, however, is limited in the third sentence of the opening paragraph when “say on” is turned into the passive construction “be said on”. To say on is for a narrative to be said into existence.²⁹ The words that are being said originate from the head, which is the “seat and germ of all”. The fourth sentence in the first section indicates that there must be a way forward somehow to a situation which is worst, as the title expresses. Only when the worst is achieved will there be no way forward any longer. Yet, even this situation will need to be expressed in words by the voice for it to take effect: “Said nohow on.”

Section 46 repeats the gist of section 1, with one important difference, that visual perception is included:

On. Stare on. Say on. Be on. Somehow on. Anyhow on. Till dim gone. At long last gone. All at long last gone. For bad and all. For poor best worse and all.

Verbal creation and visual perception are urged to proceed until the dim light disappears and all shades disappear. With a variation on the Biblical phrase quoted above, this section can be read as: “And because the mind sees, it says, let there be a continuance, and there is a continuance until the light disappears and all crea-

tions disappear. And the mind sees the disappearance of light and everything that is in it and the mind sees the darkness, that it is good.” (Where “good”, in the context of *Worstward Ho*, of course, means “bad”: “poor best worse and all”.)

Paragraph 2, after repeating the active–passive equation, goes on to state that whatever is said must be understood to be wrong: “Say for be missaid”. Words are always inappropriate. Yet words, missaid as they may be, form the only instrument with which the narrator is able to continue his narrative. Even though the narrator has made it clear that the word “say” should be understood from that point on as “be missaid”, he frequently uses the words “missay” or “missaid” expressly throughout the text. Perhaps the narrator needs to remind himself as much as the reader that “say” never just means what is commonly understood by it. Only after he repeats his original decision “Said is missaid” in 73.1 is the word “missaid” no longer used.

“See” goes hand in hand with “say” in *Worstward Ho*. Their relationship, however, is quite complicated. The word “say” implies a creative action (though it was seen to be also the result of a passive experience) whereas “see” implies the fully passive act of observation. “Say” may have the power of initiating existence; “see” can only verify and affirm it. The first visual perception is in 12, after the dim light has been mentioned in 8 and after the head with its eyes clenched has been introduced in 10. This first visual perception is of the body as it stands, after it has been *said* to be standing in 6. The seeing is thus a corollary of what has been said to be.

In 15 the word “see” is about to be used to introduce a new shade (“another”). Before the narrator proceeds to do so, however, the word “see” needs to be modified in exactly the same way as he had earlier modified “say”:

See for be seen. Misseen. From now see for be misseen. (16.1–3)

In view of this parallelism it may be assumed that the underlying train of thought is similar. Whatever the narrator observes, is presented to him involuntarily. That the observation is flawed is expressed by the fact that “be misseen” should be read for “seen”. If words missay, the resulting observation must be misseen.

Though the point of view is fixed, seeing in *Worstward Ho* does not result in undistorted perception. Focusing (“see”) on one of the shades blurs the others and

apparently the words (“say”) have a capacity to dim the objects. Clearest perception occurs only when there is no saying, when there are no words during the periods called the “blanks”. Just as saying originates from the mind in the head, the ability to perceive is made possible by the stare in the head. Only at the end of *Worstward Ho* a clear perception occurs, when all shades have been worsened to their utmost minimum.

Mind – seat of all – germ of all – soft – hell of all – why of all

The first time a mind makes its appearance in *Worstward Ho*, it is the remains of one, which the narrator thinks he needs to devise for the body to be capable of experiencing pain (6). He discards the notion almost immediately, in 9, in favour of another mind, which is the narrative’s “Seat of all. Germ of all”. This mind too is no more than a “remains of mind” (57). It is soon reduced, first to a “soft of mind” (65) then “the soft” (68 and onwards), to turn eventually into “what [little] left of soft” at the very end of the text (94). Other appellations used for the mind are, in 88, the “hell of all” and, last and worst, the “worst why of all of all”:

What were skull to go? As good as go. Into what then black hole? From out what then? What why of all? Better worse so? No. Skull better worse. What left of skull. Of soft. Worst why of all of all. So skull not go. What left of skull not go. Into it still the hole. Into what left of soft. From out what little left. (94)³⁰

The obvious echo of “seat and germ of all” (45) in “the worst why of all of all” firmly links the two phrases. The “worst why of all of all” is the ever-rational mind that wishes always to know why things are as they are (as, for example, how the fact that the body is standing must be explained in terms of bones, pain and mind). It is the inquiring mind that in the biblical view caused the human race to come to grief when Eve succumbed to the infernal serpent’s promise of wisdom. In this sense the “worst why of all” is worse than hell: it brought about hell for mankind by bringing about mortality. The terms used to refer to the mind (“mind”, “seat and germ of all”, “soft”, “ooze”, “hell of all”, “why of all”)³¹ thus form a worsening sequence of their own.

References to the presence and attributes of a mind in various transformations thus form a prominent recurrent theme in the text. What are some of the implica-

tions of the various appellations of the mind encountered in the text? The narrator himself pauses to consider the momentous implication of the phrase “seat of all. Germ of all” in 33 which has already been discussed:

All? If of all of it too. Where if not there it too? There in the sunken head the sunken head. The hands. The eyes. Shade with the other shades. In the same dim. The same narrow void. Before the staring eyes. Where it too if not there too?

In other words, if the head is “the seat and germ of all” it must also be the seat and germ of itself, i.e. it must be the creator or imager of itself. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means that the head, which when first encountered was treated as a figment (shade) of the narrator’s imagination, is in actual fact the head from which the entire narrative springs: the “scene and seer of all”. Thus the narrator and the shade of the head are one and the same. The way in which the “seat and germ of all” is the source of everything is through active invention; through letting the words which “ooze” up out of the unconscious call up images and *vice versa*; through images calling up the descriptions contained in the words we read.

Since the mind is in the head or skull (and the head/skull as shade 3 is included in “all”), it follows that when “all” is desired to “go”, so is the mind. The narrator, in other words, wishes his own mind to go. See in particular 34:

[The head] cannot go. Save dim go. Then all go. Oh dim go. Go for good. All for good. Good and all.

This desire for the mind to go on the part of the narrator is also indicated by the fact that all (including the shades and thus the head) is always “preying” on the mind (83), “gnawing to be gone” (84).

Dim and void

That the source of the dim light, first mentioned in 8, is mysterious and unknown is reminiscent of other, earlier texts by Samuel Beckett.³² In *Worstward Ho* the light is frequently identified with the empty space in which the narrative is supposed to take place, which is referred to as the “dim void”. In 14 the narrator concludes that the void is the only place and that it is thus “beyondless” (14.23). Since this

place is vast and boundless and completely without physical features, it cannot be referred to as a place and from 15 on it is called the void.³³ The setting in which the narrative takes place is everywhere filled with a constant light which knows no fluctuations and is of the lowest possible intensity. To stress the ubiquity of the dim light, the narrator asks the reader to imagine a cave or an abyss, or a sealed pipe or tube, all suffused by the same dim light.

Throughout the first half of *Worstward Ho*, the narrator repeatedly draws attention to the mystery of the source of the dim light. One might have expected attempts at speculation about the source, if the narrator had not declared that he is longer concerned with his past endeavours to reason out chains of cause and effect. Trying to figure out why things are as they are is not a concern of *Worstward Ho*'s narrator. And yet, in spite of his refusal to speculate about the origins of the light, it continues to prey on the narrator's mind (as does the source of the words) until other ramifications become more urgent. Especially in view of the text's linguistic economy, the narrator's insistence on the unknown source of the dim light (a fact he repeats some half a dozen times) raises the question why he feels this need for repetition. One reason for his incantation is likely to be that he has made up his mind not to be sidetracked by questions of causation, however insistently they force themselves on his attention:

A time when try how. Try see. Try say. ... Not now. (9.10–12, 19)

That is to say, the narrator is not interested in *past* causation resulting in the present state of affairs; but he is extremely interested in speculating on the effects of his *present* actions. From 47 on, the narrator is so much involved in theorizing about the future of the dim light and the effects of certain developments on the void, the words and the shades, that he no longer refers to the unknown source of the light.

At the beginning of the narrative the words "void" and "dim" are inseparable. Paragraphs 18 and 19, for example, give a description of the first and the second shade as they appear in the "dim void". In contrast with the dim light, however, fewer questions are asked about the setting of the boundless space, the so-called void. It is boundless and since there is only the one place (which is therefore beyondless), it is a "thenceless thitherless there" (14.26). The field of vision is necessarily always less than the "vast", "boundless" and "beyondless" expanse which

the void is. The eyes may stare far and wide, high and low, but out of the total void they can only ever encompass a “narrow field” (31.6), later on referred to as the “narrow void” (33.11)—a measure of the size of the void:

Know no more. See no more. Say no more. That alone. That little much of void alone. (31.7–11)

In 32, the claim made in 24 that the void can disappear from the narrative is revoked. Again, the interdependence of the dim and the void is emphasised when it is stated that the void can only disappear forever when the dim light disappears, along with all the shades (including the head). The narrator wishes this were so:

Oh dim go. Go for good. All for good. Good and all. (34.8–11)

The narrow field of the void is described, or rather, in the narrator’s words, “missaid”, as being “rife with shades” (48.6) or “shade-ridden” (48.7) and he wonders how he can worsen this state of affairs. The option of adding new shades is discarded until such time as the need arises. Proper worsening consists of reducing the existing shades as well as the dim light until the source of energy vanishes at long last (49) and for good (52). Since “Still dim still on”, the narrator has to go on “with worsening words” (54.4) and with “worsening stare” (54.5). In 69, the narrator contemplates how the dim light can be made worse. That making it dimmer makes it worse seems most logical; however, he leaves open the possibility that the undimmed light is worse after all. He also returns to the vast, empty distances between the various shades which form the narrative’s setting.

One of the main distinctions between the void, the dim and the shades is that only the void has no past. Nor will it have a past, until it exists no more (76). In section 86, the narrator tries to predict whether the voidness of empty space can be increased or decreased. Supposing, he reasons, all shades have been reduced to their absolute minimal state and they have almost completely disappeared from the void (which is in fact impossible unless the dim light disappears for good, as the narrator has just stated in 80), would that increase the voidness of the void? The answer given is no. Not satisfied with this answer he tries the logical next question: if all shades have been reduced to their absolute minimal state and they

have almost completely disappeared from the void, would the voidness of the void perhaps *decrease* in those circumstances? And if so, is that decrease worse then? The narrator finds the question too hard to deal with and proceeds without answering it. Perhaps the answer should be yes, since the voidness of the empty space is at its maximum when the shades are minimal. But since according to Giordano Bruno extremes are identical, so must these be. The empty space must be in its worst (and consequently in its maximum) state when all shades are as good as gone from the setting. The fact that there is still something left in the void, even though that is merely the minimum necessary to recognise voidness by contrast, may be the worst possible situation, but it still does not satisfy the narrator, who aims at nothing less than absolute nothingness. He concludes these vain attempts at understanding the relation between presence and absence by saying in a tone of frustration, yet almost endearingly: “A pox on void. Unmoreable unlesable unworseable evermost almost void” (86.18–19).³⁴

Even though the narrator does his best to convince himself and the reader that the setting of *Worstward Ho* utterly lacks the familiar dimensions of the physical world, he does not finally fool anyone with his consistent use of the word “void”. The place is not void, since there are objects in it. Paradoxically, the more elaborate the discussion of insignificance of these objects, and the more these objects are reduced, the less void the setting appears to become. The reader gradually accepts the void as another word for place or setting. It is only when the objects have disappeared completely that the setting can justifiably be called void. As long as the remains of mind function, however, there will be words, and words evoke objects, precluding the ultimate voidness of the void.

In the narrow void of 91 perfect vision of the shades has been achieved. In this “latest state”, in which further worsening is not possible, the skull—“scene and seer of all”—is ready to let in the vasts of boundless void, merging the scenes inside and outside the head. This results in a sudden change of perspective (95) which allows a comprehensive view of the three characters (old woman, old man and child) as pins, and the head itself as a pinhole. In this last state the light has been minimised to its least intensity: the “dimmost dim”. It is as if instead of regarding the stage through a pair of opera glasses the reader suddenly finds himself at the wrong end of a telescope, which reduces the characters to mere pins at the bounds of a boundless stage.

Worsen – fail – lessen

Worstward Ho describes a reasoning process starting from nothing and ending in next to nothing. It moves from a wordless and imageless universe to a situation in which language no longer expresses anything: “Said nohow on”. On the way from one extreme to another, the reader initially witnesses a minimal cast of shades in featureless surroundings and eventually a process in which the verbal texture is systematically stripped of all characteristic detail. This process of reduction the narrator calls “worsening”. Within the context of *Worstward Ho* “to worsen” can be defined as the mental action which is aimed at describing the narrator’s figments in such a way that they become in some way less than what they were.

The word “worsen” is directly related to the frequently mentioned concepts of failure and failing. Instead of trying to be as successful (i.e. comprehensive) as possible in describing and controlling mental constructions, the narrator decides (in 4) to change his strategy and “fail better”. However, as he soon argues, “to fail better” implies to “fail worse” (in 5.25). “Bad” and “good”, “better” and “worse” are almost synonymous within *Worstward Ho*’s linguistic universe, as are the verbs “try” and “fail”. Where to fail is usually a passive act, the result of an attempt that misfired, in *Worstward Ho* it is an active, conscious act (the word *fail* occurs—unusually—in the transitive sense) that needs to be sustained for as long as language emanates. That *worsening* and *failing* are used synonymously is very apt. Though the worsening process contributes a great deal to the narrator’s aim of emptying his mind, it is also doomed to failure. One reason may well be the paradoxical fact that the changes involved—even if they tend towards minimisation—actually draw attention to the existence of the “objects” involved. Fritz Mauthner says of change: “Was immer auf der Welt geschieht, wird von uns nur wahrgenommen, weil und wenn eine *Veränderung* wahrgenommen wird. ... Wir erfahren etwas von der Welt, nur weil wir Veränderungen wahrnehmen. ... Aller Inhalt unserer Erkenntnis besteht aus Veränderungen der Objekte der Erkenntnis.”³⁵ What the narrator wants to achieve is unchangingness.

Not only do all shades fall victim to the worsening process (the body and the twain lose their heads and their limbs, while the head loses its face), the narrator attempts to worsen all other phenomena as well: the dim light, the words and the blanks. The only phenomenon which remains immune to all attempts at such mental degradation is the void:

“Unworsenable void. Never less. Never more. Never since first said never unsaid never worse said never not gnawing to be gone” (85.4–7).

What can—and do—get worsened are the following:

Shade one: The head with the hat is bowed deeply down so that it is no longer visible; also the greatcoat is cut off from the pelvis down so that it is a “topless baseless hindtrunk” (39).

Shade two: The boots are taken away from the old man and child, so that they move “unreceding on” barefoot (44). The held holding hands are taken away from the old man and child (62). The old man and child are separated by a “vast of void” (82). The heads and legs are taken away and, just like shade one in 39, the old man and child are now reduced to “topless baseless hindtrunks” (87). Despite the fact that their legs are invisible, the old man and child are now said to be kneeling (i.e., their posture is no longer that of figures walking, but of figures kneeling; 89).

Shade three: The head comes to be seen full face, but the hands and the face are taken away so that only the skull and its stare are visible (45). The eyes, at first “all white and pupil”, are now changed, via “all pupil”, to “dim black holes”, said to be “unwavering gaping” (53). The skull loses all features except the area from temple to temple, in which the stare becomes dominant (67). The two black holes in the “foreskull” are reduced to “one dim black hole mid-foreskull” (88).

The dim: Though apparently capable of being worsened (52, 69), the narrator cannot make up his mind whether the dim is worse dimmed or undimmed (69; see also 75). At the end of the book (95), however, the dimmest state is reached, which implies that there has been a change of some sort.

The words: The words are capable of being worsened. There are a number of sequences of words with the same referent showing, for example, a decline in specificity (him, one, it; 35); a decline in activity (say, secrete, ooze); an increase in disapproval (the words referring to the mind). However, a more rigorous attempt at worsening, involving the speculative substitution of “they” for dim, void and shades, fails: there is still enough mind not to know what it is those words (“they”) refer to.³⁶

Worsening could be regarded as inverse creation. Since it involves the systematic process of taking away features, it does not allow any additions, even though

they insinuate themselves continually. On three occasions the narrator is about to add something, but stops himself. In 39, the narrator stops himself mentioning the specific feature that is lacking from the first shade, probably a face or a head. In 44, instead of adding an unspecified feature to the second shade, he ends up taking away their boots. In 49, the narrator goes so far as to consider adding new shades to the “shade-ridden void” (48.6), but again he realises in time that the only way forward is by means of reduction. Even so, the narrator allows the possibility of addition should a situation require it:

Add others. Add? Never. *Till if needs must.* Nothing to those so far. (49.1–5; italics added)

In fact, the only actual addition, if it may be called such, that takes place after the initial creation of the three shades occurs in 68 when the first shade is identified as an old woman.³⁷ No reason is given for this late specification.

Otherwise the text moves forward through a process of reduction exclusively. Because the worst that the worsening acts aspire to is also the least, the narrator frequently uses the related words “least”, “leasten”, “leastmost”, “less” and “lessen” throughout the text. The journey worstward is also leastward (64.1). In this synthesis least, worst and best have become one and the same semantic entity, all leading to the inevitable “nohow on”. When the shades, the words, the blanks and the dim light are at their worst, they are also at their least—their absolute minimal states which allow neither additions nor reductions, ending the worsening process.

The body

The body is the first shade to be created. It is variously referred to as “one”, “the kneeling one” or the “bowed back”. Even though this shade is present from the very beginning to the very end of the book, a full frontal view is never afforded. When the body is first called into existence, it is indeterminate: without identity, without age, without sex, without an outside appearance, without a mind. The way the body is spoken about does not indicate from which angle it is to be visualised mentally. Moreover, the body is placed in a featureless environment in an as yet unspecified posture. Since the text does not give any clues, the reader’s

imagination cannot be properly shaped. The body is not much more than a word to which no distinctive features are attributed. Its stooped and kneeling position and its sunken head may suggest that it is praying. Before the worsening process sets in, the body is said to be wearing a dark greatcoat and a dark hat. Scanty clues like these can lead to the assumption that it is a male body. So it is to the reader's as much as the narrator's surprise that the body is suddenly said to be female:³⁸

Somehow again on back to the bowed back alone. Nothing to show a woman's and yet a woman's (68.1–2).

It is also found that this woman is old:

Oozed from softening soft the word woman's. The words old woman's (68.3–4).

His own answer to the question of how the narrator came to this observation, while, as he expresses it, there is “nothing to show [that it is] a woman's [back] and yet [it is] a woman's” (68.2), is that the words “old woman's” “oozed from softening soft” (68.3–4). In fact, the entire phrase “nothing to show a woman's and yet a woman's” (68.2) is said to have oozed from the softening soft of the remains of mind.³⁹ Whichever way one looks at it, a new characteristic has been added to the originally sexless shade.

In 60, the narrator had said that during blanks—the time when words are gone—all the shades disappeared. In 77, however, he revokes this statement by saying that the shades do not disappear in the periods when there are no words. They can only disappear when there is no possibility to go on anymore. This is the case only when the dim light goes forever.

At the end of the book the hindtrunk on unseen knees of the old woman is stooped in the same way as old neglected and weathered gravestones are leaning over. Looking at this stooped woman, “Nothing [to show a woman] and yet a woman. Old and yet old.” (92.1–2), the narrator is reminded of an unspecified graveyard, “that old graveyard”, whose tombstones have lost the inscriptions identifying the loved ones they once commemorated. The only remaining words, “loving memory”, have become completely inane. They are meaningless fossils of a past that has completely disappeared to make way for a dim void in which

neither the stooped shades which are vasts apart from each other nor the skull can be worsened any further. “Such last state. Latest state” (93.3–4). With a surprising change of perspective the narrative ends, when the old woman and the other shades are reduced to three pins and a pinhole.

RATIOCINATION

Concentrating on various discrete elements of the narrative yields a number of useful insights into the book’s narrative development. In terms of the narrative action, for example, the worsening process has been identified and explained, as have the participating characters; the timeless and boundless nature of the setting has been observed. It was discovered that the mind is, curiously, both subject and source of the book’s words and images and, paradoxically, also the agent of its own worsening. The words, combining their function as the medium in which the narrator tells his tale with their role as—to some extent—autonomous agents, were shown to be the most important “character” in the narrative. In the discussion of their role reference was made a number of times to the nature of the discourse they represent, amounting in fact to a carefully structured argument. This, the last section of this chapter, examines the nature of the stylistic technique they employ in their argumentation.

Since *Worstward Ho* is—essentially—a piece of monologue, the narration is restricted to one single perspective, the text representing the thought process of one human mind. Beckett shows no interest in the relationship between an external reality and the mind. He has transformed the stream-of-consciousness technique into a highly specialised tool to explore the workings of the mind. To avoid confusion with the conventional understanding of the concept of “stream-of-consciousness” which mixes subjective thoughts with authorial comments, this technique will be referred to as ratiocination.

It is a linguistic and philosophical commonplace that we exert no more than incomplete control over our language, especially if we think of it as a tool for the expression of speculative thoughts and ideas. There is an undefinable but nonetheless real barrier beyond which language takes control over, and thus limits, our power of expression. Philosophy runs up against the same problem. As Mauthner observes towards the end of his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*: “Wer ... in seinem Denken das Denken kritisierte, das heisst mit Hülfe der Sprache die Sprache

selbst untersuchen wollte, gleicht eigentlich einem Physiologen, der lebendigen Leibes sein eigenes Gehirn blosslegen und damit experimentieren wollte”.⁴⁰ But a huge reward is held out to anyone who is able to perform this impossible feat: the opportunity to look back into familiar territory from new perspectives. Scientists and thinkers have always been drawn by this reward, but especially in more recent times great strides have been made in the exploration of the unconscious. The explorations started by Freud, delving into the unspeakable depths of the mind, have gradually extended the area of our knowledge, and linguistic control over it has closely followed. Much has become “speakable” as the explorers’ vocabulary has penetrated public discourse.

In his explorations of consciousness Beckett, too, is urged to visit regions where language has never visited before, making language go where it cannot go by making it talk of “unspeakable” things:

go where never before
no sooner there than there always
no matter where never before
no sooner there than there always⁴¹

Once this country has been visited, its landscape becomes indelibly imprinted on the mind, and it is from that moment part of the self. In his early prose the unspeakableness that is Beckett’s subject is couched in words and descriptions that appear firmly embedded in a familiar world:

For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man ... (*Watt*, p. 74)

Though they may describe mental landscapes that are unfamiliar, the metaphors used in *Watt* and other early works are familiar enough, and so the language does not result in the same degree of alienation that *Worstward Ho* engenders, with its lack of metaphors. In the earlier work the mind’s darkness shows itself in the mind’s inability to make sense of things, in mental voices, or in the strange events that befall the characters:

My keepers, why keepers, I'm in no danger of stirring an inch, ah I see, it's to make me think I'm a prisoner, frantic with corporeality, rearing to get out and away. Other times it's male nurses, white from head to foot, even their shoes are white, and then it's another story, but the burden is the same. Other times it's like ghouls, naked and soft as worm, they grovel round me gloating on the corpse, but I have no more success dead than dying. ... It's varied, my life is varied, I'll never get anywhere. I know, there's no one here, neither me nor anyone else, but some things are better left unsaid, so I say nothing. (*TfN* VI, p. 89)

The work from the middle period abounds with such instances, where the characters' mental world retains a firm connection with the everyday world we are familiar with. While Beckett's worlds are perhaps never very ordinary, and a good deal goes on in them which is incomprehensible to the characters that inhabit them, they are mostly recognizable as derivations of the world we know. Though it is impossible that Malone should continue to tell us in *Malone Dies* what happens in the period when he has lost his pencil stub, at least a man lying in bed making notes with a pencil stub itself is a familiar notion. Beckett's stage, though it may be regarded as "a sort of non-locality, a place where time is absent, or never gets going",⁴² is littered with the detritus of everyday reality: for instance, the dustbins in *Endgame* or Winnie's handbag in *Happy Days*.

Pim's hellish surroundings in *How It Is* are still connected with our everyday world through the household presence of a collection of tins of food and a tin opener. And by calling Pim's surroundings "hellish" we are fitting even them into our world view quite comfortably, as a kind of Hell or Purgatory: a metaphysical explanation, but one which is firmly established in the Judaeo-Christian world view. The persona of *The Unnamable* can be regarded as the dramatisation of an unceasing mental voice, much resembling the inner voice as we experience it every day and as it has been frequently represented in fiction by the stream-of-consciousness technique.

Worstward Ho may also be recognised as a representation of an inner voice, following on from *The Unnamable*. The narrative, however, puts the reader's understanding yet more severely to the test, even though, paradoxically, the text is informed by a recognizable, even down-to-earth logic. One reason it is so difficult to understand is that once again Beckett sets out for unknown territory, trying

to make language perform an impossible feat: he describes how a consciousness is quite purposefully attempting to stop the flow of its own thoughts. Rather than a consciousness simply trying to be conscious of what it is and does, *Worstward Ho*'s is a consciousness trying to empty itself from all wordly detritus. However, as we shall see, all attempts at achieving this are doomed to fail since words continue to well up out of the unconscious for as long as the mind continues to be active. But another reason for the difficulty, no doubt, is the fact that the narrator in *Worstward Ho* no longer attempts to link his reasoning to the world outside his own speculating mind, through direct reference to it, or even through imagery. *Worstward Ho* is peculiarly devoid of metaphoric language.⁴³

The voices in Beckett's work, with their unstoppable flow of words, often manifest themselves as uncontrollable, even unwanted, presences in a mind—presenting it, in other words, with a degree of chaos.⁴⁴ As if they were human, the characters instinctively try to deal with those voices rationally. Ratiocination involves harnessing conscious thought in an attempt to create order, through the use of reason, in the chaos of unpredictable offerings from the unconscious.

The ultimate order that could be achieved as a result of ratiocination is for the cause of chaos to be taken away. This means not just shutting out the influences from the world, but also—or perhaps even especially—that never-ceasing mental flow. Bringing order to it is one thing, but to stem the flow altogether must be better. Ratiocination may serve simply to create order, but in *Worstward Ho* Beckett attempts to use it to go one step further, to efface the workings of the mind altogether, to break the nexus between words and the images they call up, and to eliminate the need to make sense of those images. That emptying the mind of all thought is considered the most perfect way to create order can also be observed, for example, in those eastern meditation techniques that are aimed at emptying the mind completely. "For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker" (*Molloy*, p. 68).

The rational process as represented by Beckett in *Worstward Ho* is triggered by an obsessive desire for precision. Through a process of formulation, elimination, reformulation and re-elimination of possibilities the mind painstakingly frames its propositions:

Enough still not to know. Not to know what they say. Not to know what it is the words it says say. Says? Secretes. Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it secretes say. What the so-said void. The so-said dim. The so-said shades. The so-said seat and germ of all. Enough to know no knowing. No knowing what it is the words it secretes say. No saying. No saying what it all is they somehow say. (58)

Almost every sentence contains a reformulation or clarification of the preceding one. From the first proposition: “[There must be] enough [remains of mind] still [to enable it] not to know” the narrator moves step by step to the proposition “[There must be enough remains of mind to know that there is] no saying what it all is they [the words secreted by the mind] somehow say”.

In the same passage the desire for precision may be observed in another shape as well. This is the enumeration: “... the so-said void. The so-said dim. The so-said shades. The so-said seat and germ of all”. Such pseudo-exhaustive lists are typical of Beckett’s narrators. Other examples of lists in *Worstward Ho* are:

All three together. Where there all three as last worse seen? Bowed back alone. Barefoot plodding twain. Skull and lidless stare. (54)

and

All not gone and nohow on. All there as now when somehow on. The dim. The void. The shades. Only words gone. (77)

Rather than assuming that the referent of “all” will be clear, or devising a general category to cover the items at once, the narrator persists throughout the text in meticulously listing each item by name. In our cogitations, our “intellection”, we usually also make use of abstractions. Instead of enumerating possibilities, we cover them with a single statement: e.g., “X may occur at any time of the day or night” rather than “X may occur in the morning, or in the afternoon, or in the evening, or during the night”. The narrator’s failure in *Watt* (Watt’s own failure?) to use such abstractions accounts for the lengthy enumerations in the book. The comic effect results, at least partly, from the reader’s realization that lengthy though they

are, they never exhaust the number of possibilities or cover all eventualities. *Watt's* form of intellection is particularly myopic. Its desire for precision is at the expense of its scope.

This precision is, of course, a precondition for the type of analytical reasoning which constitutes the narration of *Worstward Ho*. This analytical reasoning uses various techniques, such as dialectics, deduction and logic. Just as the persona of Socrates in Plato's work proceeds in his philosophical investigation by a dialectic process, the narrator of *Worstward Ho* attempts to develop his argument along dialectic lines. He repeatedly asks himself questions:

That said on back to try worse say the plodding twain. Preying since last worse said on foresaid remains. But what not on them preying? What seen? What said? What of all seen and said not on them preying? True. True! And yet say worst perhaps worst of all the old man and child. That shade as last worse seen. Left right left right barefoot unreceding on. They then the words. Back to them now for want of better on and better fail. Worser fail that perhaps of all the least. Least worse failed of all the worse failed shades. Less worse than the bowed back alone. The skull and lidless stare. Though they too for worse. But what not for worse. True. True! (59)

Besides these rhetorical questions, bearing the answer within them, there are also real questions, designed to verify various propositions. However, where Plato places the question and the answer in separate mouths, the narrator of *Worstward Ho* is a single voice, and he gives his own answers:

Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so. (35)

Like any philosophical system, the narrator's reasoning depends to a large extent on logic. Most of the propositions that subsequently serve the narrator as his premises appear to have been chosen at random. As soon as they have been uttered, though, their truth value appears to be unquestioned and they may be used as premises for further reasoning. Paragraph 32 contains the proposition "[the]

dim [light] can go”, along with the statement “till [the] dim [light comes] back”, which of course entails that the dim light can come back as well as go. In paragraph 52 the narrator decides, without giving a reason, to “unsay [that the] dim [light] can go”:

First on back to unsay dim can go. Somehow on back. Dim cannot go. Dim to go must go for good. True then dim can go. If but for good. One can go not for good. Two too. Three no if not for good. With dim gone for good. Void no if not for good. With all gone for good. Dim can worsen. Somehow worsen. Go no. If not for good. (52)

The new proposition is at first that “[the] dim [light] cannot go”, only to be replaced in its turn by “[If the] dim [light is] to go [it] must go for good”. This proposition is then used for the conclusion that “[it is] true then [that the] dim [light] can go”. The narrator’s final position is that it is possible for the dim light to go, but not for it to come back.

Logic is used also for a sleight of reasoning that lies at the core of the book’s paradox. In 33 the proposition “[The head (shade III) is the] seat of all [and] germ of all” from paragraph 10 is repeated and now used by the narrator as a premise which entails the conclusion “If of all of it[self] too”. In other words, by having called the third shade the seat and germ of all, he has also called it the seat and germ of itself. The logical deduction is that the head devised by the narrator as the seat and germ of all has a picture of itself inside itself: “There in the sunken head the sunken head”.

Also characteristic of the narrator’s reasoning are the regular summaries, of the argument or, as here, of the characteristics of one of the mental constructs that functions as a character in *Worstward Ho*:

So sudden gone sudden back unchanged as one dark shade plod unreceding on. (26)

This is an almost complete summary of the qualities assigned to shade two so far: the old man and the child which together form shade two are capable of disappearing from the void and coming back, suddenly; they plod on as if they were

one and without ever receding from view. Missing from this catalogue of qualities is the fact that their backs are turned and their heads sunk.

If it were not for the fact that the narrator never makes announcements of the direction his argument is about to take (another characteristic of the narrator's reasoning), such summaries might be regarded as "signposts", helping the reader not to lose his bearings. In fact, it is much more likely that the summaries primarily serve the narrator himself, who is having a difficult enough time keeping track of the logical consequences of his propositions. The fact that the "signposts" only ever point back indicates that the narrator is not sure how his argument will develop, despite the fact that he has a larger rhetorical purpose in mind.

Ratiocination can be seen as some kind of autonomous energy which drives the mind. Its flow cannot be stemmed. It is its own subject, for Beckett's representation of ratiocination is iconic. Iconicity is the imitation of the thing to be expressed in the use or organization of the material used to express that thing. The function of iconicity is to achieve a more immediate experience on the part of the reader of the thing to be expressed. The term "iconicity" is borrowed from the field of semiotics as developed by the philosopher C.S. Peirce. In semiotic terms, an icon is a sign in which the *signifiant* resembles the *signifié* like a photo resembles its subject and an onomatopoeia resembles a sound.⁴⁵

In his essay "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce" Beckett himself singles out the iconicity in Joyce's *Work in Progress* for special praise: here

form is content, content is form. ... His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*. ... When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep. (See the end of *Anna Livia*..) When the sense is dancing, the words dance. ("Dante ...", p. 27)

Beckett compares Joyce's use of iconicity with that of other English writers:

Shakespeare uses fat, greasy words to express corruption. (...) We hear the ooze squelching all through Dickens's description of the Thames in *Great Expectations*. This writing that you find so obscure is a quintessential extraction of language and painting and gesture, with all the inevitable clarity of the old inarticulation. Here is the savage economy of hieroglyphics. (*Ibid.*, p. 28)

“Hieroglyphics” is Beckett’s term for iconic language in this essay. However, as Beckett observes, the iconicity of Shakespeare and Dickens falls short of the variety employed by Joyce. And, it may be added, by Beckett in *Worstward Ho*.

The entire text of *Worstward Ho* can be viewed as iconic: the flow of words runs parallel with the thoughts as they occur, and the reading time equals the narrative time. Examples of fully iconic monologues, showing absolute concurrence of narrative time with reading time are rare in literature, but the dramatic monologues of some of the Elizabethans and Robert Browning furnish some supreme examples.⁴⁶ Like that of the narrator in *Worstward Ho*, the voice of the speaker in “My Last Duchess”, for instance, represents the conscious thought process as it goes on at the moment of speaking:

She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

The similarity between the two texts extends to the apparent verisimilitude with which they represent a mind which, though aware of its larger rhetorical purpose, still searches for the right things to say and the best possible way (“how shall I say”) to say them. This verisimilitude is of course no more than suggestion. Ultimately both texts are as full of artifice as any literary text: “My Last Duchess” is written in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets.

The iconity of ratiocination in *Worstward Ho* extends to the text’s typography. The pauses in the thought process are represented by blank spaces between blocks of text;⁴⁷ the full stops punctuate the propositions. Similarly Beckett uses “—” to imitate the broken off attempts at formulating propositions. The reader may speculate along with the narrator of *Worstward Ho* about the duration of the pauses:

Blanks for nohow on. How long? Blanks how long till somehow on? Again somehow on. All gone when nohow on. Time gone when nohow on⁴⁸

Iconicity is not only used for ratiocination. The way the worsening process coincides with the use of worsening words may also be said to be iconic:

Worsening words whose unknown. Whence unknown. At all costs unknown.
Now for to say as worst they may only they only they. Dim void shades all
they. (56)

The use of the pronoun “they”, referring to the dim light, the void and the shades, represents a worsening of those words.

Having said that Beckett’s representation of ratiocination in *Worstward Ho* is iconic, it should also be observed that it is not mimetic in the naturalistic sense of the word. *Worstward Ho* shows a representation of ratiocination which is rhetorical and stylised, like Joyce’s stream of consciousness technique. Not every half-formed and discarded thought that enters the conscious mind is reproduced. True mimetic representation of the random thoughts that occur in a mind not intently bent on a single purpose is impossible, since the speed with which thoughts occur cannot be matched by any method of capture. Even the extreme ellipsis Beckett employs in *Worstward Ho* does not result in narrative time which approaches the speed of thought.⁴⁹ But even where the thought process is not random, as in *Worstward Ho*, it is still necessary to select propositions for their functionality in advancing the argument. To simulate the hesitations of the thinking mind, Beckett does include some false steps, which are subsequently revoked. In a phrase like “On back to unsay void can go” (32), Beckett presents the narrator’s retraction of his earlier assertion that the void can disappear thus:

“The void. ... Never gone. Never back. Till yes. Till say yes. Gone too”. (24)

As will be seen in Chapter 2, “Language”, for Beckett the highest form of art is that form of art which is completely devoid of reference to anything outside the text, i.e. the art form in which the *signifiant* bears the closest possible resemblance to the *signifié*. In the essay on Van Velde Beckett presents as his ideal that the work of art has to achieve the status of an object in its own right rather than be the representation of another object or objects. In this ideal situation the *signifiant* must be fully identical with the *signifié*. On this higher level (that of the text as a work of art), *Worstward Ho* might thus be said to go beyond iconicity. Without reference to anything outside itself, the text is not meant to resemble anything: it is simply itself. The cryptic phrase “Say for be said” in *Worstward Ho* may be

explained in the light of this idea. It expresses the unbreakable nexus between the word and its referent. For the narrator to say a thing equals the coming into being of that thing by being said. When a word is spoken it says the thing it refers to, and the thing it refers to is said by it. The formula “say for be said” functions as an incantation to ward off interference from the real world. Of course we know that this is impossible, for words derive their meaning always from conventions agreed on in the wider world. But Beckett is concerned to establish as direct a link between thought and image as possible, wishing to shut out the real world.⁵⁰

Another formal characteristic of Beckett’s representation of ratiocination is elliptic syntax. The extent to which this is meant to be mimetic is open to discussion. Psychological, linguistic and philosophical research on the precise relationship between language and thought remains inconclusive. However, there are reasons for Beckett’s elliptical use of language, other than mimetic ones, discussed further in Chapter 2, “Language”.

In the history of literary stream-of-consciousness techniques a wide variety of perspectives have been employed, ranging from the multiple perspectives of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* via Joyce’s perspectives alternating between that of the author and that of any number of characters, to a single perspective, without authorial intervention, such as that in Dujardin’s *Les lauriers sont coupés*, which Joyce identified as his source of inspiration for *Ulysses*. Beckett’s point of view in *Worstward Ho* is of the last, limited variety. It is solely that of the single mind whose thought processes are being represented and there is never any authorial intervention. There are also no flashbacks, no descriptions, no comments—some of the ways in which the hand of an authorial narrator may reveal itself. In fact *Worstward Ho*’s perspective is still more limited than Dujardin’s, for there is no dialogue.

Lastly, since ratiocination is the representation of one single mind’s thoughts, there is as much consistency of style as one would expect from a mind which does not attempt to disguise itself. This covers register, manner of reasoning (use of logic), language use (e.g. syntax, archaic register [e.g. “naught”], vocabulary, metaphors, puns). But there are certain breaks in the style of *Worstward Ho*, such as the occasional bursts of emotion, as in (7) “care”; (34); (38) “alas”; (39) “pox”; (45) “!”; “stooped as in loving memory some old gravestones stoop” (92) etc.⁵¹

Despite all similarities to the stream-of-consciousness technique, Beckett’s use of ratiocination in *Worstward Ho* differs in one crucial way: there is an almost

complete absence of reference to external time and place. In this way there are no sense impressions to complicate the process of ratiocination. This absence of “occasion” is an attempt to ban the material dimensions of reality. It is not unlikely that in his desire to ban reality Beckett follows the Dutch philosopher Arnold Geulincx, who defused the Cartesian principle *cogito ergo sum* by refusing to recognise any connection between thinking and the material world. What is spiritual can only cause a spiritual effect; what is material can only affect other material things. No interchange between the two is possible. What is said—or written—exists, for the narrator as for the reader, and, conversely, what is unwritten is non-existent. The narrator’s mind contains nothing more than the words on paper.

The attempt to ban a reality outside the mind is ultimately bound to fail, if only because of the repeated and compulsive use of logic and rational argumentation in the urge to create order in the chaos of mind. The comparison of the posture of shade one with that of a gravestone “stooped over the graves [...] of none” (92) has the force of an epiphany breaking through the cool reasoning style of the process of ratiocination. The narrator experiences the sudden jolt of an involuntary insight, in the same way as Joyce describes the experience of his epiphanies. In this epiphanic vision the shades become their own memorial. The aptness of the image gives it a deep emotional charge. Logic is, after all, a linguistic system of compatible beliefs or propositions about reality or, as Wittgenstein calls it, the world:

1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

1.2 The world divides into facts. (*Tractatus*)

Thus the very use of logic presupposes the existence (and relevance) of the world. In fact, the relationship between logic and the world is one of complete co-occurrence:

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form.

To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world. (*Tractatus*)

The unknown inner world of *Worstward Ho* similarly breaks down into logical propositions.

The narrator's heavy reliance on ratiocination does not ultimately bring him the desired emptiness of mind, though he comes very close indeed. When the text eventually achieves its "Nohow on", this is not due to ratiocination's rigid control over language, but to an unexpected leap of the imagination.⁵² "Nohow on" represents the destination of the journey "worstward ho" announced by the title.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

¹ Oxford, 1988, p. 42.

² Including, for example, Enoch Brater (*The Drama in the Text: Beckett's Late Fiction*, OUP, 1994, p. 137; Andrew Renton ("Worstward Ho and the End(s) of Representation", in *The Ideal Core of the Onion*, ed. John Pilling and Mary Bryden, Reading 1992, p. 100) and Connor (*op. cit.*, p. 42).

³ Hermione Lee, "Death Rattle", *Observer*, 22 May 1983, p. 30. John Pilling writes that "'Ho' seems in some danger of ending up a satellite companion of Arsene's 'Haw!', Watt's 'risus purus'" (in "'Nohow On' Worstward Ho", in *Beckett at Eighty: A Celebration*, Reading, 1986, p. 26).

⁴ For a discussion of the genesis of the title see "The Evolution of the Text" in Volume 1.

⁵ "Dante..." in *Disjecta*, London, p. 21.

⁶ "Sottisier", RUL MS 2901; see Volume 1, Appendix 1.

⁷ *Collected Poems*, p. 66. Beckett never translated the *Mirlitonnnades*; a rough crib might render the poem as "ahead / the worst / until the point / where it begets laughter".

⁸ See Chapter 4, "Reverberations".

⁹ Cf. "A little less of no matter what no matter how no matter when a little less of to be present past future and conditonal of to be and not to be come come enough of that on and end part one before Pim" (*How It Is*, p. 42).

¹⁰ Some literary references, other than the Shakespearean ones treated above, will be dealt with in Chapter 4, "Reverberations".

¹¹ See Chapter 2, "Language".

¹² Dougald McMillan, also hearing a homophone, identifies the worst word as "nohow", not only because it is "a markedly aberrant usage", but also because "it is a disastrous confirmation of the impossibility of ever reaching an end: 'There is not any 'knowhow', expertise, or any other known means of progression to a final state.'" ("Worstward Ho" in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S.E. Gontarski, New York, 1986, p. 208).

¹³ "If the text shies away from 'reality', or tangible presence, it reads as skeletal fiction in more ways than one. Within the narrative, of course, we encounter bones and skulls, but the narrative itself is stripped of all motivational flesh; we see *what* happens but not *why* it happens. [...] The narrative aspect of this 'novel' ... is unclear" ("*He all but said...*": *Evasion and Referral in the Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett*, Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English at the University of Reading, 1989, p. 290).

¹⁴ This prolegomenon was a late addition: it is handwritten at the top of the first page of typescript C.

¹⁵ There is one example of worsening in 22–38, that of shade one, originally said to be standing, but now twice said to be kneeling (25 and 30). Though this kneeling is presented in the same terms as most cases of worsening are to be presented later in the text, it is in reality no more than a correction to what the narrator had said earlier: shade one never, in fact, did stand up, because it "could rise but to its knees" (25.16).

¹⁶ It is interpreted as such in the French and German translations; see *Worstward Ho / Auf's Schlimste Zu*, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, and *Cap au pire*, Paris, 1991.

¹⁷ Juliet, *Conversations*, p. 157.

¹⁸ Manuscript A has a paragraph where Beckett has the narrator say "No detail above all. ~~Detail~~ Fatal. Such as ~~the~~ water-mattress. Any mattress too much. Simply supine." In the subsequent MS draft, Beckett the author has actually deleted the water-mattress and other, similar, detail as if

acting on his own decisions (see “The Evolution of the Text” in the Introduction to Volume 1). Discussing the “trilogy” A. Alvarez, for example, also mentions the tendency for the author to coincide with the narrator (*Samuel Beckett*, pp. 52–53).

¹⁹ In this respect *Worstward Ho* resembles *A Piece of Monologue*; the two texts also share the incorporation in the monologue of “stage directions” affecting the visualisation of characters and setting, such as fading in and out.

²⁰ The same trinity features in *Company*; with the father actually being referred to several times as a shade, for example in “your father’s shade in his old tramping rags” (p. 86), and the mother depicted as “stooping” (p. 66).

²¹ It may be noted that Beckett actually presents words as a character in his radio play *Words and Music*.

²² *Theater heute*, 1966, quoted in Brater, *Why Beckett*, London, 1989, p. 118.

²³ John Pilling says of the blank spaces in *How It Is* that “behind each utterance—as we are continually reminded—lie ‘vast tracts of time’” (*Frescoes of the Skull*, p. 63). H. Porter Abbott discusses how in *Malone Dies* Beckett merges narrative time with narrated time, and uses the notion of “blanks” being somehow as significant as words, if not more so (in “The Harpooned Notebook: *Malone Dies* and the Conventions of Intercalated Narrative” in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*).

²⁴ There are two brief references, in 9–10 and 36–39, to the outside world’s notion of time, which are identified as being in the past, the point being precisely that they are no longer relevant.

²⁵ Cf the show in *The Unnamable*, p. 99.

²⁶ Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text: Beckett’s Late Fiction*, OUP, 1994.

²⁷ Cf “The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue.” (*The Unnamable*, pp. 15–16). This forms an interesting variation on the trope of the work of art as stilled time. Schiller, too, talks of the paradox, in his “Spruch des Konfuzius”:

Rastlos vorwärts mußt du streben,
Nie ermüdet stille stehn,
Willst du die Vollendung sehn.

²⁸ It may be noted in this connection that the Hebrew *dabar* means both word and action, a correlation which is so central to Goethe’s *Faust* (*Wort and Tat*). John Donne expresses it concisely in his sermon of 11 February 1627: “Our *Esse*, our *Being*, is from God saying, *Dixit et facti*, God spoke, and we were made.” (*The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 7, p. 368).

²⁹ For a further discussion of the active–passive nexus see Chapter 2, “Language”.

³⁰ “Soft” (used for the mind) and “ooze” (used for the words that come from the mind and the way they come out) are metaphors for the way the mind works. They can be found in the lexical field which also comprises mud (cf *How It Is*) and thus the biblical view of man’s material roots, and soggianness, imperfection.

³¹ Strictly speaking, “Scene and seer of all” refers to the stare in the head, but by implication as well as by the parallel with “seat and germ of all” it can also be said to refer to the mind.

³² For example, *Texts for Nothing*, *A Piece of Monologue*.

³³ There is an etymological connection between the words “vast” and “void” (*OED*).

³⁴ The void is both “unworsenable” (85) and “unworseable” (86). In practice the meaning of the two words is identical: “not capable of being made worse”. However, the former shows the perspective of the agent that is to make worse; the latter of the thing that is to be made worse.

³⁵ *Wörterbuch der Philosophie: Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1924, vol. 3,

pp. 340–41.

³⁶ See Chapter 2, “Language”, for a more detailed discussion of the linguistic aspects of the worsening process.

³⁷ See the section on the body below. The technique of worsening is not dissimilar to that of sculpting in stone, the only art form that creates by reducing its material.

³⁸ A similar indeterminacy of sex occurs in the story “Enough” (1967), about two persons roaming about the hills walking hand in hand. The reader is given scant information on the sex of the narrator and his or her relationship to the “he” being described.

³⁹ In 39, the narrator timely halted himself when he was about to add new features to the first shade: “Add a—. Add? Never.” (39.16–18) and he decided to give the shade a bowed posture, so that the head in hat would not be visible. In retrospect it would seem possible that the feature he was about to add was the face, which might have given away the sex of the first shade.

⁴⁰ *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, vol. 3, p. 642. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”, is how Wittgenstein expresses it (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.6).

⁴¹ Beckett’s untitled translation of the French “Là”, card sent to James Knowlson, 21 September 1987. First published in the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, New Series, Volume 1, 1 & 2, 1992, p. 2.

⁴² Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, p. 143.

⁴³ See Chapter 2, “Language”. A remarkable exception, however, is the metaphor in “Stooped as loving memory some old gravestones stoop in that old graveyard. Names gone and when to when. Stoop mute over the graves of none” (92). This is an example of a conventional metaphor, as well as being a reference to the world outside the “place” created in the mind.

⁴⁴ Winnie also experiences such an invasion, except that in her case the voice is singing: “One cannot sing ... just like that, no. (Pause.) It bubbles up, for some unknown reason, the time is ill chosen, one chokes it back. (Pause.) One says, Now is the time, it is now or never, and one cannot. (Pause.) Simply cannot sing. (Pause.) Not a note.” (p. 42).

⁴⁵ According to Rolf Klopfer (in *Poetik und Linguistik*, München, 1975, p. 113), in turn rephrasing J.M. Lotman’s theory: in the poetical principle of “Ikonisierung” “[werden] alle Elemente des Textes—sowohl auf der Ausdrucks- wie auf der Inhaltsseite—insgesamt zum Zeichenträger [...] zur Ausdrucksseite eines Inhaltes also, der nicht im Text selbst bereits direkt artikuliert ist: ‘...der Text ist ein ganzheitliches Zeichen, und alle einzelnen Zeichen der ihn bildenden natürlichen Sprache sind hier auf das Niveau von Elementen dieses einen Zeichens reduziert.’”

⁴⁶ Molly Bloom’s monologue in *Ulysses* is fully iconic in the sense that narrative time and reading time fully concur; however, it differs in that the thought it contains is only partially conscious, and Molly makes no attempt to develop a cogent argument.

⁴⁷ Joyce uses a similar device when he inserts a new paragraph in Bloom’s thoughts in “stream of consciousness” passages.

⁴⁸ A writer (also presenting a narrator searching for the right way to tell his story) who uses similar iconic devices is Laurence Sterne. In *Tristram Shandy* empty chapters represent the inability of the narrator to concentrate on his writing while his Uncle Toby whistles “Lillabullero” (Laurence Sterne, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Penguin, 1974, pp. 592–93.) and a series of asterisks indicate the time spent by his father reading (*ibid.*, p. 377).

⁴⁹ The automatic writing experiments of the Surrealists perhaps come closest to a mimetic representation of the way the mind thinks without the controlling force of reason.

⁵⁰ For a further discussion of words as signs (the nexus between words and their reference), see Chapter 2, “Language”. In “*He all but said...*” Andrew Renton discusses *Worstward Ho* (in the

words of the summary) “as a paradigmatic representation of the act of reading” (rather than one of the act of writing as in the Trilogy): “*Worstward Ho* seeks [...] to defeat all external resonance, by an introversion which makes the words themselves both subject and object of the text.” Renton also refers to the essay on Van Velde in his interpretation of the opening sentences: “[*Worstward Ho*] is positioned between the two but focusses in on the text-as-itself. It extends itself by looking at the word as signifier, rather than at the interpretative level of the signified. This is not to say that *Worstward Ho* does not convey meaning for all its efforts. In *The Unnamable* being comes from saying; at least selfhood is defined by utterance emitted from ‘the body’, such as it is. In *Worstward Ho*, however, the principle has reversed and shifted into participles of a past. Being is thus transferred back to the realm of having been said: ‘Say for be said.’ In this way the instructions require that an object exists if it is reported to exist.... The text is brought into being by its own state of writtenness” (*op. cit.*, p. 268).

⁵¹ In his thesis Andrew Renton, for example, discusses the break in narrative style in: “Say the night is young alas and take heart. Or better worse say still a watch of night alas to come. A rest of last watch to come. And take heart.” (38) According to Renton, “Here the text becomes allusive beyond its own borders. It plays at being poetic or, perhaps more accurately, creates poetic rhythms in these gaps in the text. The words ‘almost’ ring true because they begin to resemble a pre-established order of words, and ‘word-ness’. Beckett’s suggestions for ‘poesy’ (as he calls it in *Lessness*) in this paragraph evolve in stages into in an iambic pentameter” (*op. cit.*, p. 298).

⁵² This is further discussed in Chapter 3, “The Roots of *Worstward Ho*”.

Chapter 2

LANGUAGE

UNMASKING LANGUAGE

In the first and last analysis *Worstward Ho* is a deeply perceptive inquiry into the nature of language, both implicitly and explicitly. As a writer Beckett is of course a professional user of language, one of many. But Beckett's linguistic achievements throughout his *oeuvre* are outstanding, and *Worstward Ho* is unprecedented in respect of the extraordinary use to which language is put in it.

The fact that language is not a very malleable instrument that we can bend to our needs is a critical commonplace. Language comes to us with a burden of connotations and denotations, as David Lodge observes:

[T]he writer's medium differs from the media of most other arts ... in that it is never virgin: words come to the writer already violated by other men, impressed with meanings derived from the world of common experience.¹

Despite his extraordinary linguistic abilities, Beckett had a love-hate relationship with language. At the same time as it was his only tool as an artist, it formed the largest obstacle in his artistic pursuit: to find the "language of being". As he formulated it in conversation with Lawrence Harvey:

"Being" ... has been excluded from writing in the past. The attempt to expand the sphere of literature to include it, which means eliminating the artificial forms and techniques that hide and violate it, is the adventure of modern art. Someday someone will find an adequate form, a "syntax of weakness."²

Beckett's remarks to Harvey may well be traceable to his reading of Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. According to Mauthner the problem is an existential one. "Since for Mauthner there is no 'thinking without speaking', and since, when we speak, there is no distinguishing between the report and that which it is supposed to be a report of ... we are continually uttering meaningless

statements. Only by transcending the limits of language (which Mauthner considers impossible) will we get to know things as they really are.”³ It may well have been the challenge of attempting to transcend the limits of language that incited Beckett to continue writing after his failed attempt in the trilogy of novels that came out of “the siege in the room”.

Writing in French enabled Beckett to rid himself at least of some of the stranglehold that a native tongue always has over its user, and by doing so he succeeded at least to some extent in improving the efficacy of language as his instrument.⁴ But using a foreign language does not solve the much more deep-seated problem that language as such—any language—fails to go where its user wants it to go. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset made the point about human culture in general:

[Man’s] expression of [an] idea is, obviously, impure at the root; because man’s intellect begins everywhere by being corporeal, or if you wish it put more exactly, let us say that it begins with an inability to think anything without matter.⁵

It is for this reason that Beckett employed the term “transbordement” for the radical action he felt it was necessary to take for a writer who wished to say anything about the essentialia of life:

... chaque fois qu’on veut faire au mots un véritable travail de transbordement, chaque fois qu’on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s’alignent de façon à s’annuler mutuellement. (*Disjecta*, p. 125)

The “véritable travail de transbordement”, or act of real trespassing, that Beckett wished to commit was to tear apart the veil of language itself :

Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. Grammatik und Stil. Mir scheinen sie ebenso hinfällig geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschütterlichkeit eines Gentlemans. Eine Larve. (“German Letter of 1937”, *Disjecta*, p. 52)

Beckett's entire *oeuvre* probes into the workings of the mind engaged in the act of thinking or speaking. It lays bare the way man's thinking is bound by the words he has available. Most of Beckett's postwar fiction is the account of his struggle to use language in a way that is not, as it were, built into its DNA; in a way that is not expressive of the phenomenal world with which it is inextricably bound up. By his continuing failure to rid language of its representational nature Beckett poses the question whether we are really in charge of our brain to the extent we delude ourselves we are. When we are not consciously thinking or speaking, and even at times when we are consciously trying *not* to think, words—*ipso facto* the wrong ones—will still insinuate themselves into our helpless consciousness. For his narrators Beckett frequently employs a voice or voices that appear to come from somewhere like the subconscious, oozing into the conscious. These oozings are capable of being controlled by the conscious brain only to a very limited extent. Witness the narrator in *Worstward Ho* making sense of the words "It stands" that, to judge by his surprised "What?", appear to have floated into his consciousness:

It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand.
(6.1–16)

Similarly in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* the narrator undergoes the "pell-mell babel of silence and words" (*TfN* VI, p. 91); numerous further examples may be found in Beckett's *oeuvre*.⁶

The sense of not being in control of language, then, takes two main forms. On the one hand, in the same way as life is not of our own making, the words are not of our own making. We have been fed on them, but they are the product of the world, and will always continue to betray their origins. While it is precisely these properties of language which make possible ordinary communication between people on a day-to-day level, they become a severe impediment if we wish to contemplate who we really are when we try to think of ourselves in isolation rather than in relation to others. Very literally, in our everyday existence we are

the language we speak, and for that very reason they stop us from really expressing our own essence. Wittgenstein expresses it thus in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

That which mirrors *itself* in language, we cannot express by language. (4.121)⁷

Because they are so burdened with the material life of the people who use the words, they prevent us from ever really knowing ourselves beyond what we are in the phenomenal world.

Secondly there is the problem that it is impossible to stop the flow of words. Language insinuates itself into our brain, causing trains of thought all of its own making. Words are a sign of existence: *verba se insinuant in mentem meam ergo sum*. Thus the continuation of language as it were prolongs existence; inescapably, life is equated with the flow of words. In that sense words are unalienably and intimately our own, just as our life is unalienably ours. However, being weighed down with “worldness”, words cannot ever express the essence of that life: the real self. Because the words will always stand in the way of an understanding of self, our only hope of experiencing the real self may lie in their coming to an end.

This problem is compounded by what might be called the “active–passive nexus” of saying and seeing.⁸ The active and passive voices frequently occur as pairs in *Worstward Ho*. They are presented as somehow complementary or equal:

The say? The said. Same thing. Same nothing. Same all but nothing. (75.6–10)

This entails that saying something is equated with the thing that is said coming into being. When the narrator says “a body”, the body is being said or, as it were, “created” by the act of saying. Similarly, when the narrator sees an old man and child, this old man and child are brought into existence by being seen. It is hard to escape the parallel with Berkeley’s dictum *esse est percipi* which, as we know from *Film* and countless passing references, intrigued Beckett. But while Berkeley applied it to the entire physical world in using it as proof of the existence of God, the use Beckett makes of the notion in *Film* and *Worstward Ho* is of a more psychological, humanistic, nature. *Worstward Ho*’s entire universe is a mental one and applying the dictum to that mental situation does not require an act of faith; it simply replaces the eye of God with the self-regarding inner eye. By saying or

seeing a thing in one's mind, including one's self, that thing acquires (mental) existence. *Worstward Ho's* narrator plays with this continuously. For instance, in the case of the "unseen knees" it is not really possible to image a body that rests on unseen knees without mentally picturing the knees. The word *knees* calls up its associated image in the phenomenal world.

But most pertinently, the active–passive nexus indicates the way the narrator relates to the words: to say the words is the same as the words being said in order that they may be heard:

Assume notably henceforward that the thing said and the thing heard have a common source Situate this source in me, without specifying where exactly, no finicking, anything is preferable to the consciousness of third parties and, more generally speaking, of an outer world. (*The Unnamable*, pp. 107–8)

The narrator's single-minded pursuit in *Worstward Ho* is to achieve—against all the odds resulting from the fact that his only tool is language—the nothingness of the end of language. But paradoxically, even if nothingness could be successfully achieved, the result could not be expressed in language. If it is true, as is suggested by the main thesis of this book, that in *Worstward Ho* Beckett comes closer than in any other work, earlier or later, to the sense of such an ending, then the key to that achievement must lie in the way language is used in spite of its intractability. It is the thesis of this chapter that in *Worstward Ho* the narrator's use of language shows a major advance on any of Beckett's narrators' previous attempts at manipulating it, detracting from it, and to "bore one hole after another in it" ("German Letter", p. 172).⁹ In this last major prose work Beckett's narrator is unexpectedly capable of a new mastery over his refractory tool, just as *Worstward Ho's* narrator at the end of the book manages to make a leap forward towards nothingness and void by pronouncing that the book's cast of shades are "sudden all far". Here he comes closer to achieving the end he so longs for, and he does so precisely as a result of the way he manages to make the dead words of the world¹⁰ mean something, even if, paradoxically, that meaning goes towards expressing nothingness, and is being achieved by an act of unmitigated battering and boring of holes.

The narrator's achievement in *Worstward Ho* gives an unexpected (and unintended) significance to the phrase "it's the end gives the meaning to words" from

Texts for Nothing VIII (p. 96). For it is precisely in the end, which they come so close to achieving, that their meaning lies. Few of the words used in *Worstward Ho* escape unscathed from the use they are put to in the text: their dictionary meaning has to give way to the meaning the text itself imposes as it inches its way forward. And the same goes for language at large: grammar, syntax—the entire linguistic structure groans under the strain.

“Blot, words can be blotted and the mad thoughts they invent”, the narrator says with false confidence in *Texts for Nothing* VI, “all you have to do is say you said nothing and so say nothing again”. But it is never that simple, and his story continues, in the hope that he may one day “hit on the right ones, the killers”. Words cannot be blotted; neither do the killer words exist. The only possibility is to manipulate language into abandoning as much as possible of its power to express. The narrator’s method in *Worstward Ho* consists in making the words slough off some of the dead meaning that clings to them so tenaciously and kicking them into a new life, disciplining them, doing anything possible to make them perform in the service of the book’s quest. And yet, of course, this display of new-found power does not mean that Beckett has thereby relinquished his “syntax of weakness”. For any new life with which the words are invested in *Worstward Ho* is the result of a relentless mangling, disabling, and undoing, and tends towards the ultimate disabling and undoing that is ending.

The “blotting” metaphor is of particular interest,¹¹ suggesting as it does a comparison with the visual arts. Beckett’s intense interest in the visual arts¹² led him to write on the subject frequently; among Beckett’s critical writings, those on the visual arts stand out. We do not necessarily have to assume that the critical writings constitute a poetics in disguise, but since it is obvious that subject–object relations form a recurrent theme, it makes sense to see to what extent the critical writings—early though they may be—contain thoughts that may shed light on Beckett’s own writing practice in relation to the question of the relationship between art—in Beckett’s case language—and reality.

In his much quoted dialogue with Georges Duthuit on Bram van Velde (originally published in *transition* in 1949) Beckett talks about Van Velde’s “predicament” as an artist. This predicament is that of the tyranny of expression in art, which Beckett first introduces in the discussion on Tal Coat in the first of the *Three Dialogues*, but explains in the third, on Van Velde:

Among those whom we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominantly with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity. (*Proust*, p. 120)

Though, as Beckett says, “[o]thers have felt that art is not necessarily expression”, “the numerous attempts made to make painting independent of its occasion have only succeeded in enlarging its repertory” (p. 121). Beckett advocates a radical position. There are, Beckett asserts, two ways of not having one’s hands bound by the impossibility of expression: either one goes on painting in the expressive mode blissfully unaware of the predicament or, if painfully aware of it, one must somehow overcome the gagging effect that the awareness of the predicament causes. He then hails Van Velde as having achieved the latter:

My case ... is that van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticised automatism [of either giving in to the artist’s “expressive vocation” or attempting to relax the relations between the artist and that which he is trying to express], the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail ... (*Proust*, p. 125)¹³

The “estheticised automatism” Beckett is referring to is the visual arts’ equivalent of the inevitability of linguistic expression. It is Beckett’s aim in his writing similarly to dispel the tyranny of expression. But in the comparison between the writer and the visual artist, the writer’s predicament might well be worse than that of the visual artist, since his medium is language which, as was argued above, has expression for its very core. In painting meaning and expression can be avoided by taking refuge in abstraction, but when using language expression cannot be avoided.¹⁴

In the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* Beckett uses the term expression in one breath with “occasion”. Occasion here appears to be the counterpart to expression: that which is to be expressed. Beckett calls Van Velde “the first whose painting is bereft, rid, if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material”. In Beckett’s use of the term, occasion is thus the conventional object of all artistic expression: human experience in the widest sense.¹⁵

To undermine the power of language to express, Beckett must somehow deal with the problem of “occasion”. In the course of his *oeuvre* Beckett’s fictional universe increasingly moves away from the one we all share, becoming that of a private mental vision. This private form of “occasion” he has in common with Bram van Velde. To paint his misery, to paint nothingness, to paint the unknown depths of the self, are the kinds of terms Van Velde uses to describe his work.¹⁶ His paintings are explorations of the self, attempts at seeing inner truths. Their only occasion is the artist’s own mind:

[O]nce, on leaving his house, Bram noticed a pair of spectacles in a dustbin. He tried them on. They suited him, so he kept them for the next twenty years. But one day he had to go to see the optician. Jacques [Putman] went with him. Eye test, spectacles. Optician all amazement.

– But with spectacles like these, you can’t see anything at all.

And then straightaway:

– What sort of job do you do anyway?

Bram, noticing the trace of mockery in his astonishment, retorts magnificently:

– *I paint my inner life.* (Juliet, *Conversations*, p. 106)

In order to achieve this exploration of the self, Beckett must attempt to break, in whatever way he can, the unavoidable nexus between language and the world we know, which gives occasion to our day-to-day use of language. *Worstward Ho* is the furthest Beckett manages to go on that road.

Beckett’s utilisation of a form of “occasion” which is as idealist and private as possible has resulted in an increasingly bad fit between our shared world and his fictional worlds, culminating in the world of *Worstward Ho*, which touches only intermittently on the world as we know it. In other words, of the two types of consistency in a fictional narrative: intratextual consistency, and consistency between the intratextual world and the real world, *Worstward Ho* offers a sufficient quantity of the former, but little of the latter. In this way Beckett confounds readers’ expectations. However, the very medium of language assures the continuing link with the real world; language offers the reader just enough clues not to abandon his attempts at completing the incomplete picture that he is given.

Indeed the very fact of the incomplete picture is likely to spur the reader to greater efforts at completing it:

All communication takes place across barriers. ... Provided that communication is going on, the interposition of further barriers has a tantalising effect. It teases us to more vigorous attempts, sharper alertness, greater efforts at compassion or sympathy. (Walter Ong, quoted in Lodge, *Language of Fiction*, p. 71)

The lack of verisimilitude of Beckett's writing (increasingly from *The Unnamable*) has led some critics to disregard the relationship between the intratextual and extratextual worlds altogether and to regard the world of Beckett's later prose, and especially *Worstward Ho*, as a purely textual one, i.e. without direct reference to the real world.¹⁷ There is of course much to be said for this view; after all, a fully textual world is the most obvious example of a world in which the words are not about something, but are that something itself. "It is as if the *written* has become three-dimensional", as Renton writes (*op. cit.*, p. 167). It is a seductive notion, especially because it suggests that Beckett might have succeeded in achieving his ideal of an art which is completely devoid of reference to anything outside itself, i.e. the art form in which the *signifiant* is identical with the *signifié*. (Beckett himself uses the terms "representer" and "representee" in the same essay on Van Velde.) But the elegance with which it dismisses the issue of the fictional text's reference to the real world should not blind us to the fact that dismissing the issue is precisely what it does.¹⁸ Clearly, reference to the real world remains an inevitable and significant part of *Worstward Ho*'s language, or it would not be able to communicate with its readers. Readers will in any case always attempt signification within the framework of their experience and, moreover, will always develop strategies of their own for doing so if no existing ones will serve.

But the qualification of *Worstward Ho* as a textual universe does call attention, and rightly so, to the text's revolutionariness. Perhaps the best way to establish the extent of that revolutionariness is by trying to make an analysis by conventional means of the text's relation to "occasion", despite the fact that Beckett himself has written that "[t]he analysis of the relation between the artist and his occasion, a relation always regarded as indispensable, does not seem to have been very productive" (*Three Dialogues*, in *Proust*, p. 124).¹⁹ Apart from the fact that the critic

ought not to neglect performing a task which any reader not schooled exclusively in post-structuralist thought will almost automatically perform, Beckett's dismissive remark had better be disregarded for the practical reason mentioned before, *i.e.* that examining the relationship between the artist and his occasion might help to elucidate the nature of *Worstward Ho's* world and the peculiar relationship between *Worstward Ho* and reality.

The remainder of this chapter will examine the text's relation to "occasion" through focusing on the most important of the linguistic means that are dragged into the service of *Worstward Ho's* "worsening": a killing of meanings too readily taken for granted, and replacing them with new life in order to break the "estheticised automatism" of language. These means include: ellipsis; iteration; prosody (rhythm; rhyme of various kinds, musicality); and the resurrection of the dead language of clichés.

BREAKING DOWN LANGUAGE

Worstward Ho's narrative appears largely inspired and controlled by the uncontrollable oozings of the narrator's remains of mind. But despite all superficial appearances, *Worstward Ho's* language is not the broken-down heap of rubble that the language pessimists have been predicting for most of the twentieth century, unless it be in that peculiar form Beckett himself advocated in his much-quoted "German letter":

Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit, sie ist ja Gott sei Dank in gewissen Kreisen schon da, wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird. ("German Letter", *Disjecta*, pp. 171–72)²⁰

There is certainly no evidence of any breakdown of logic: on the contrary. Yet the contrast between the narrator's relentless rationality²¹ and the apparent deterioration of language itself contributes to the reader's sense of language being misused.

In spite of his apparent lack of confidence in language, and the very real evidence of breakdown observable in *Worstward Ho*, what Beckett in fact does, is precisely to misuse language most efficiently. The paradox of *Worstward Ho*—paradoxical in view of its narrator's pursuit—is that *Worstward Ho* demonstrates an unparalleled capacity for language to signify precisely while language is being

demolished so ruthlessly. The paradox can be resolved only by the realization that this new power to signify is not that which is inherent in language, but that which Beckett has conferred on it. While *Worstward Ho*'s language has weakened to a trickle of almost meaningless oozing in the public sense, it has at the same time acquired a new strength to "eff" in the context of Beckett's *oeuvre*.

Before turning to a detailed examination of the means of linguistic "worsening" in *Worstward Ho* it will be useful to have a brief look at some general characteristics of the book's distinctive linguistic style. The very first paragraph sets that style:

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.

Much can be said about *Worstward Ho*'s language, even on the basis of this short first paragraph. The chiming repetition is obvious (six times "on"; three times a form of "say"; twice "nohow"—clearly varying "somehow"—all in a matter of fourteen words); the deviant syntax ("Be said on"; "Till nohow on"; "Said nohow on"); the shortness of the sentences (here the average is 2.33 words per sentence, against an overall average in *Worstward Ho* of 3.9; still extreme by anyone's standards); the ellipsis; the amount of white space in proportion to the number of words (the paragraph ends after a mere two lines of text, and a line of blank space separates it from the next paragraph).

Reading the next paragraph will add the observation of unusual vocabulary ("missaid"), and the recurring juxtaposition of the active and passive forms of verbs ("Say on. Be said on" in the first paragraph is continued here in "Say for be said"). Further reading will identify in addition: the strong underlying sense of logic; the prevalence of functional transformation of grammatical categories (such as nouns being used as verbs); the scarcity of personal pronouns (the absence of *I* and *you*) and indefinite articles.

What all these peculiarities add up to is inaccessibility: the rubble resulting from a very efficient misuse of language. *Worstward Ho* does not readily communicate with its readers. There are few texts in Beckett's *oeuvre* whose narrators appear as little concerned with readers as *Worstward Ho*.²² The two most immediately obvious characteristics of *Worstward Ho*'s language, ellipsis and repetition, will be the first to be examined in closer detail.

ELLIPSIS

The two most obvious characteristics of *Worstward Ho*'s language are also to a large extent each other's opposites: ellipsis and iteration. Each sentence has been stripped of all words that were not absolutely indispensable, resulting in a strongly elliptical style.²³ On the other hand, many sequences of elliptical sentences consist of repetitions with marginal differences, resulting in apparently unnecessary words:

Kneeling. Better kneeling. Better worse kneeling. Say now kneeling. From now kneeling. (25.11-15)

or:

Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. (61.13-18)

On closer examination, however, each repetition is a (maximally elliptical) necessary next step in a careful reasoning process.

The shorthand notation that results from ellipsis is often grammatically deviant, such as: "at in the dim void shades"; "save dim go"; "the as one plodding twain"; "long sudden gone"; "by way of somehow on"; "somehow with sight to do"; "till dim if ever go"; "into what then black hole"; etcetera. Yet on careful scrutiny just enough grammatical clues may be detected to reconstitute the full sentence.

Ellipsis can be regarded as an iconic imitation of thinking.²⁴ Through avoiding complete and well-formed sentences, and lack of punctuation, speed is suggested.²⁵ Meticulous reasoning is the hallmark of all of Beckett's characters and there is enough information in the truncated syntactic units presented in *Worstward Ho* to enable the reader to construe the logical propositions contained in them and usually, if desired, the grammatical sentences in full.²⁶ A passage like

Void then not that much more again? No. Void most when almost. Worst when almost. (86.9-12)

has been rendered all but incomprehensible as a result of the maximum degree of ellipsis. In this passage the narrator speculates on the possible effect of obliterating

the shades which in his imagination people the void. In its unellipticised form the passage could read:

Will the void in that case not increase again by that much? No. The void is most truly void when it is almost completely void. The void is worst [which in *Worstward Ho* is equated with best] when it is almost void.

This is not to say, however, that each elliptical utterance can be construed unambiguously. Indeed, the very notion of disambiguating the language of *Worstward Ho* belongs squarely in the phenomenal world. The ambiguity is clearly intended. Take the example of *Worstward Ho*'s verbs, which mostly occur in the form of the full verb. This leaves the exact grammatical form uncertain. The first verb in the text (and one of the most frequent words in the text) is "say" in the phrase "say on". This can be paraphrased in a number of different ways, indicating one of three grammatical forms: (1) "Say [the word] 'on'" (imperative); (2) "Go on saying" (imperative); (3) "[To] say [the word] 'on'" (infinitive); (4) "Go on saying" (infinitive); (5) "Let's say [the word] 'on'" (subjunctive). However, the equation of "say" and "be said" (which occurs in 2) can perhaps be used as an argument for limiting the potential number of interpretations.²⁷ Take the following sequence:

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. (3.1–4)

In addition it is possible to surmise elision of a personal pronoun. If "say" were an active form, it could be interpreted as being short for the grammatical sentence "You say that there is a body". However, against this it should be remarked that there is no corresponding interpretation of the passive form "be said", while both "say" and "be said" can be interpreted as an imperative or as an infinitive.²⁸

Even if disambiguation was not intended by Beckett, it is tempting to speculate that if Beckett had translated *Worstward Ho* into French, this and many other textual ambiguities would at least have begun to be resolved. But even in the absence of such a translation, the reader familiar with Beckett's work might find clues elsewhere in Beckett's work. An obvious place is *The Unnamable* (see Chapter 3, "Roots"). "I, say I," is the fifth sentence of the novel. In French, Beckett has "Dire je", and the text continues in the infinitive:

Sans le penser. Appeler ça des questions, des hypothèses. Aller de l'avant.

If “Dire je” is equivalent of “I, say I”, is it not likely that *say*, too, should be interpreted as an infinitive, so that the phrase should be spelled out as “I, to say I”? Though the reader of the English text, unlike the translator, does not have to select just one reading, the infinitive is likely to be more central to the possible range of readings than any of the other readings.

In *Worstward Ho* ellipsis takes two forms. First, there are reductions from fuller forms found earlier in the text itself (e.g. *dim* from 32 onwards is the “dim light source unknown” from 8 and 12; after 65 the “soft” is the “soft of mind”; all three shades are given shortened appellations in 36). But other cases of ellipsis do not occur as reductions within the text. Rather, they give the impression of referring back to an earlier text or texts. “What when words gone” (55.1), for example, could be taken as a much shortened version of words Winnie speaks in *Happy Days*: “What would I do without them? (*Pause.*) What would I do without them, when words fail?” (p. 40). Some occurrences of ellipsis can be retraced to a less elliptic form in the earlier draft versions, and show the process of distillation discussed in Volume 1 at work. But in most cases ellipsis was there from the first manuscript draft.

Ellipsis can be regarded as an iconic imitation of the speed of rational thought. But the main characteristic of ellipsis being reduction, the elliptic style of *Worstward Ho* can be said to be mimetic also of the attempt to achieve the ultimate reduction of a mental void—the narrator’s main aim. Ellipsis can thus be regarded as one of the results of worsening. The text could then represent the last state of the worsening process, like the way the end of *Eh Joe* represents the final stage of Joe’s successful attempt to squeeze the voice of his conscience from his mind.

The use of ellipsis also contributes to Beckett’s aim to evolve “a language without reverberations”,

... a transparent medium, drained of all local and associative colour ... [containing] the maximum tension and compression with the minimum weight and fuss. It is the prose writer’s equivalent of the advanced metallurgy of space flight: a medium which is neutral, almost weightless, yet able to withstand enormous stress. (Alvarez, p. 82)

With its extreme degree of ellipsis *Worstward Ho* comes close to achieving “the maximum tension and compression with the minimum weight”. Since the words do not operate in their usual configurations, in tried and tested combinations with other words, but are out on their own, they cannot borrow strength from their companions, but must be able to withstand the stress all by themselves. On the other hand, there is undeniably a quantity of poetic “fuss” in the book: rhyme, assonance, alliteration, etc. The poetic colouring of *Worstward Ho*’s language will be discussed at greater length below. However, if this poetic usage causes any reverberations, it does so *within* the text only. It does not add any “local and associative colour” in Alvarez’ sense.

The effort to decipher the dense language that results from heavy ellipsis puts a great strain on the reader. The reader is continually aware of language as an intricate tool rather than of language in its usual role as a communicative medium, which achieves its maximum potential when the instrument has become invisible. Its emphatic presence adds life to the language, to enable it to do things that dead words cannot do.

Worstward Ho’s narrator remarks that “[there used to be a] time when [I would] try [to explain] how [the body got up]” (9.10). Indeed, so much of the earlier work featured exhaustive listings and calculations of possibilities (think of *Watt*). Even *How It Is*, though it features a great deal of ellipsis, does not achieve *Worstward Ho*’s extraordinary density. *Worstward Ho*’s degree of ellipsis remains unprecedented in Beckett’s work.

LIMITATION AND ITERATION

The second prominent feature of the text besides ellipsis is its limited vocabulary, of only about 410 different words. Given that the total number of words is 4489, this means that on average each word is used almost eleven times, resulting in an extraordinary degree of repetition.

“On”, for example, occurs 85 times and it is both the first and last word of the text. It is the central patterning word. It functions as the web’s hub, or the stone dropped in the still water around which the other words are grouped in concentric and ever-widening circles. (The metaphor itself indicates both circularity and progression; the opposite metaphor, of a vortex, is also apt.) The rhyme of “on” with “gone” will be seen to be an important one, since to be gone is the main goal

of the progression towards the “worst” of the title: the book’s concern can be summed up as the desire to go on till all is gone.

As the central word, “on” links with almost every word or phrase of the text directly or in one, at the most two, removes. These include primarily the phrases with “on” (“anyhow on”, “somehow on”, “nohow on”, “plod on”, “on back”). But other strands may be followed. The rhyme of “on” with “gone” (see further below) establishes a link with “go”, and thus—through the phrase “go for good”, which occurs numerous times, and expresses the narrator’s main concern—with “for good” (and its permutations (“for good and all”; “for bad and all”; “for poor best worse and all”; “for worst and all”), which together occur some 25 times. This group of permutations of “for good” in its turn merges with the expression “for worse”, meaning “to make worse” or “to be made worse” (which equals “to go worse”). The words, for example, have “room for worse”:

The words too whosoever. What room for worse! (38.1–2)

The variant “Way for worse” (“let us make way for worse”) returns again to the title, and thus to the “on” with which the book opens:

Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse. Pending worse still. (39.8–12)

This reference to the title occurs, incidentally, at the point in the text where the worsening process actually begins.

“For good and all” means “permanently, finally” from the time it first occurs, but the literal meaning of “good” is forcefully present, in the sense of “for benefit, for advantage”. The latter meaning is evoked with greater force retrospectively, when the variation “for bad and all” is introduced.

With words being used on average almost eleven times each, it is not surprising to find the text exhibiting a range of stylistic devices that depend on repetition in one form or another, such as parallelism, homographs, homophones, epithets and formulas. None of these are used gratuitously, and all contribute vital semantic links in the web of *Worstward Ho*’s meaning. These many connections all serve as cohesive devices, reminding the reader of the purpose of the process of mental reasoning the narrator is engaged in, and of its ultimate aim, the achievement of

nothing. The primary effect of the repetition is that every subsequent time the same word is encountered, instead of referring the reader to his own vocabulary and its existing connotations, it recalls the earlier occurrence(s) in the text itself. From this the word takes on connotations, and even denotations, that are defined by its context in *Worstward Ho* only.

There are two types of repetition: with (1) and without (2) variation. Parallelisms are an example of the former, and they are frequently used for elaborate puns. The play with the words *good* and *bad* and their comparatives and superlatives is a central example. The first time the two words occur in juxtaposition is in 5.24:

Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. (5.21–25)

One of the conventions set up by the text is that commas are not used. Supplying the comma which this convention allows us to assume to be missing, the meaning of the elliptic utterance “Or better worse. Fail worse again” could be reconstituted as “Or, it is better to say, worse. You fail worse again”. The second occurrence of *better worse* is in (6.14), where it has already acquired the meaning it will have from then on: “or, it is better (=worse) [to say]”. The third occurrence clinches this interpretation: “Fail better worse now”, meaning: “fail better, which is worse”. In retrospect, this reading would also fit the first occurrence of *better worse*: “Or you fail better again, which is worse”. Once the meaning of this shorthand notation has been established, it begins to function as a formula which no longer needs elaborate analysis each time it is encountered but is simply identified with the exercise of mental “worsening” performed by the narrator. The meaning of the phrase *best worse* (in 61) can be directly derived from that of *better worse*: “the best way of making/becoming worse (= better)”.

At the same time as the meaning of *better worse* is thus being established, a process of permutation of the phrase *for good* is in train. In this process forms of the words *good* and *bad* are also juxtaposed and exchanged, as in “for poor best worse and all” (46.11), and “Any other would do as ill” (19.4). Thus the development of *better worse* intersects with and echoes that of *for good*. After *for good* occurs initially with “sick” and “throw up” in (5.27; 5.28), it is joined with “go” in (5.29), with which it remains connected throughout (with the exception of 70.8). In its various permutations, the resulting phrase *go for good*, referring to the narrator’s aim of

achieving a mental void, is at the very core of the text. Its close semantic link with *better worse*, the phrase that accompanies almost every stage of the worsening process, can thus be seen to be central to the book's design. "Better" and "worse" both imply progression, depending as they do on a previous state in respect of which they are better and worse—a progression which is towards going for good.

Also in the category of repetition with variation are what may be termed "formulas of form". Short though *Worstward Ho* may be, its style is unusual enough for distinctive conventions to be set up. In fact, some conventions are so forceful as to become formulaic. Formulaic use of language in *Worstward Ho* includes formulas by form as well as by content. (The latter will be discussed below.) Formulas by form occur when unconventional, elliptic linguistic structures are repeated with different contents, as, for example "from now x for y", which is short for "from now on x is to be substituted for y". Similarly, the combination of *what* followed by an indication of time occurs numerous times, the first being "What when words gone?" in 55.1, but also, for instance, "what then" (94.4). "No bones but say bones" (6.7) is repeated as "No ground but say ground" (6.9); the formula is a variant of the earlier construction "Say a body. Where none" (3.1–2).

Punning pervades the style of *Worstward Ho*; the variations on "for good" have already been noted. Homographs and homophones are some of the most efficient instruments for punning. Even though the word *dim* in *Worstward Ho* refers only to the quality of light in the void, the word's connotation includes dim-wittedness. The frequent repetition (50 times in the course of the book) of *dim* has an incantatory effect. But there is also a metaphorical link. The expression 'the lights have gone out in his head' points to someone's poor mental capacities. Since the void turns out to be in the head of the nameless narrator, it can be said that the dim light also refers to the low level of the intellect's activity. In *Stirrings Still* the narrator wonders whether he is "in his right mind". This is primarily to be taken literally; the narrator imagines himself wandering through the back lanes where thoughts occur in his mind. However, there is no mistaking that it also says something about the narrator's perturbed state of mind. Similarly, the word "blank", referring to the silences between the words, evokes the expression "a blank expression", also pointing to a lack of intellectual activity.

"One" in 36.1 is a source for confusion—hence the narrator's "Meaning—meaning!—meaning the kneeling one". The word, which is supposed to refer to

shade one, is temporarily confused with the impersonal third person pronoun. Similarly, *still* combines three meanings: the adjective indicating lack of movement as well as lack of sound; but also the meaning as in its Dutch translation “steeds”, which is capable of the same pun: not budging.

If, for the sake of convenience, we take the term *homograph* to include the use of a word in more than one grammatical category, such as *ooze* as a noun and a verb, homographs are also one cause of the text’s limited vocabulary. A phrase like “But but a shade” (in 69.3) is typical of the text’s extensive use of homographs. *But* is here used in two meanings consecutively, and *shade* (which occurs frequently to signify the images of the four characters with human features that the narrator is concerned with in the book) is used in the—in the context—unexpected sense of a small degree, a touch.

Punning through homophones—actual or suggested—is another major source of strength in the web of meaning. The verb *prey*, for instance, is first used in 30, of the bones of shade one. The last time shade one has been mentioned is in 25, where an attitude of praying is clearly suggested:

Back turned. Head sunk. Vertex vertical in hat. Cocked back of black brim alone. Back of black greatcoat cut off midhigh. Kneeling.

To remark on a faint single echo might seem rather far-fetched. However, by 83 and 84 *preying* has acquired overtones that push it so strongly in the direction of praying as to make the link inescapable:

All always faintly preying. Worse for naught. Worser for naught. No less than when but bad all always faintly preying. Gnawing. (83.9–13)²⁹

Gnawing to be gone. Less no good. Worse no good. Only one good. Gone. Gone for good. Till then gnaw on. All gnaw on. To be gone. (84.1–9)

The preying in 83.9 has become the act of reminding the narrator of the fact that nothingness has not been reached so long as “all” continues to insinuate itself on the mind. In 83.13 *preying* is replaced by *gnawing*, and both could be literally substituted by “praying”, in the sense of “wishing fervently”. And if this is not enough

to establish the suggestion of “praying”, in 92 the posture of shade one, who had—unexpectedly—been identified as a woman in 68, is described as being stooped in the same way as gravestones “in that old graveyard” are stooped over the graves of none. Gravestones are the place where one prays for the soul of the deceased to rest in peace and to make sure that the mortal remains and his actions during life on earth do not hold back the soul’s flight to heaven. And so we turn full circle, coming back to preying via the worms gnawing the body. And wishing fervently to be gone is, of course, the book’s major theme.

The word *scene* is used only once, in “Scene and seer of all” (45.10), where it echoes *seen* so strongly that the reader is apt to mistake the one for the other. He has been subtly prepared for this deliberate confusion in at least two ways. In the first place “Scene and seer of all” parallels the active–passive correllation established at the opening of the book (“Say on. Be said on” (1.2–3)) and continuing throughout the text in two ways: as *scene* – *seer* and as *seen* – *seer*. Secondly there is the peculiar circularity of the two heads, each with its pair of staring eyes, seeing each other and being seen by each other. This circularity is first introduced implicitly in 33, but not fully discussed till 41.

Throughout the text the word *hole(s)* occurs for the eyes, but in 91, after the two holes in the skull have turned into “one dim black hole”, the hole becomes identical with the whole in the sense of *all*:

Somehow again and all in stare again. All at once as once. Better worse all. The three bowed down. The stare. The whole narrow void. No blurs. All clear. Dim clear. Black hole agape on all. Inletting all. Outletting all. (91)³⁰

Phrases like “No knowing how know only no out of” (14.13) indicate an involved and conscious play on *no* and *know*³¹ and *nohow* and *know how* which we are already familiar with from the end of *Ill Seen Ill Said*:

Decision no sooner reached or rather long after than what is the wrong word? For the last time at last for to end yet again what the wrong word? Than revoked. No but slowly dispelled a little very little like the last wisps of day when the curtain closes. Of itself by slow millimetres or drawn by a phantom hand. Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound

pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness. (p. 59)

What the narrator expresses here is a desire not simply for everything to be devoured, but to have *known*, however fleetingly, the resulting void, i.e. nothingness, which would be tantamount to knowing happiness. The homophonous “no happiness” also suggests that happiness can only be experienced when the final word “happiness” vanishes, the moment when all expression has definitely come to an end. At that supreme moment the knowledge and the vanishing occur at the same time.³² In *Worstward Ho* the *know-no* play begins in 8.2 with “Know nothing no”. This phrase is a crucial one for an understanding of *Worstward Ho*, and harks back to the end of *Ill Seen Ill Said*: “it is not possible to know ‘nothing’” to all intents and purposes is identical with “there is no nothing”. Despite the narrator’s intense efforts, at the end of the book nothingness, or complete void is not achieved. That is to say, not in the text. The best the narrator can achieve is a reduction of the phenomena that stop the void from being truly void to a minimal size: three pins and a pinhole at the bounds of the boundless void. What comes after that is unspeakable.

Repetition without any variation may be found, for example, in certain recurring phrases used exclusively in connection with one particular shade or dim or void, and we may term these epithets. “Unreceding on”, for example, is reserved for shade two, the plodding twain, and it remains the identifying epithet even after the twain have become separated, for example in 89.1, where the old man, though single, is still going “unreceding on” like the former twain. “Seat and germ of all” is reserved for the head, shade three. And “narrow” always refers to the void.³³

What is the effect of this lexical limitation and iteration? By dint of repetition in a limited number of contexts, a dense web of meaning is woven. The vast number of links of all kinds between individual words and phrases underline the thematic unity. That, for instance, section 46 is central on the narrative level can be easily, and most obviously, established through a straightforward close reading and semantic analysis; but this finding is corroborated by an analysis of the variety of

stylistic means involving repetition it displays. (See below for a closer examination of section 46.)

A more important effect is that the more limited the vocabulary, the less (unwanted) connotation (and thus reverberation outside the text) filters through. In fact, the opposite is stimulated. As a word is used in the same meaning in varying contexts, that core meaning is more firmly established. Words and phrases being defined by the text, the reader is less likely to retrieve denotations and connotations from his own mental dictionary. Instead, denotation and connotation are both defined by their context in the text itself. Together with the extreme level of ellipsis, this results in a severe restriction of the reader's imagination. The words' meaning becomes circumscribed by their use in the service of the narrator's purpose.

PROSODIC DEVICES

Prosodic devices such as rhyme, alliteration and assonance, which abound in the text, may also be included in the category of repetition involving change. Far from being ornamental, they add strength to the web of meaning. The most complex connection established by the use of rhyme is that between *on* and *gone*, and *go* and *no*. Section 46 yields a good illustration of the link between *on* and *gone*, not just in rhyme, but also in meaning:

On. Stare on. Say on. Be on. Somehow on. Anyhow on. Till dim gone. At long last gone. All at long last gone. For bad and all. For poor best worse and all. (46.1-11)

A distillation of the crux of the section coincides with the pivotal point where the word *on* in clause-final position is replaced by *gone*: "Anyhow on. Till [all] gone". This is the central concern of the text as a whole. (It is repeated *verbatim* in, for example, 84.8-9.) *Gone* is in its turn linked here with one of the permutations of "for good" which, as was shown above, always co-occurs with a form of the verb *go*. Rhymes of *go* and *no* occur in 34, 52 and 80, with *no* defining the boundaries and conditions of *go*. In 50 all four occur together:

On. Somehow on. Anyhow on. Say all gone. So on. In the skull all gone. All? No. All cannot go. Till dim go. (50.1-10)

These four words are not only connected in the rhyming pairs *on* and *gone* and *no* and *go*, but also in the *no-on* permutation of the same letters.

The *naught-brought* rhyme occurs only once, but here again it significantly connects two words which together express the text's theme: for the contents and activity of the mind to be brought to naught (and *naught* all but echoes *gnawed*).

Twice a rhyme occurs between *vast* and *last*: in 87 and 93. Through a complex process the *vast* has by then been identified as a variant of the void:

Next the so-said void. The so-missaid. That narrow field. (48.1-3)

Where in the narrow vast? Say only vasts apart. In that narrow void vasts of void apart. (54.15-17)

If we take *vast* as a variant of void, it is, like void, the state aspired to by the narrator, and thus that desired "last state".

Rhyme is often joined by alliteration and assonance into a richly musical texture, as in

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worst. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse. (61)

Though a certain baroque extravagance cannot be denied, and prosodic qualities of words and phrases apparently determine the course of the text to a large extent, the repetition only serves to limit meaning: the effect of rhyme and alliteration is a numbing of the ratio, since the emphasis is on the musical qualities of the language.

One of the initial problems, on Beckett's own admission, was the "poetic" quality of English—the wealth of unwanted imagery, color, allusion, and reminiscence conjured up by the simplest sentence. And Beckett's earliest attempt

at a solution was to intensify the richness of this color and allusiveness, of this “poetry,” to the point where the “poem” itself [Whoroscope] becomes virtually incomprehensible to anyone but the poet himself, and thus stylistically defeats its own object. (Coe, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42)

In *Worstward Ho* Beckett employs a very similar method. If he had decided to write out all of *Worstward Ho* in poetic stanzas, it might have become known as a 96-poem cycle with a single theme. Rhythm and variations in metre are manipulated in order to render musical effects. The use of assonance, eye-rhyme and full rhyme in the words “one”, “gone” and “on” in the last five lines gives the following “poem” a sense of finality. The use of sibilants in “so”, “sudden”, “unchanged”, “shade” and “unreceding” suggest continuance, whereas the voiced plosives in “back”, “dark” and “plod” seem to point to sudden breaks in this continuance:

Two free and two as one.
So sudden gone
sudden back unchanged
as one dark shade
plod unreceding on.

In paragraph 57 the word “still” occurs six times and the word “enough” five times. Because of these repetitions the superficial meanings of these words are emphasised. Beckett uses “still” in the sense of “nevertheless” but because of the melodic repetition and its occurrence at the end of lines/sentences, followed by a full stop, the sense of “silent” and “motionless” reverberates. The same goes for the word “enough” which refers to the “remains of mind”, but again because of the persistent repetition without the literal reference, the word becomes almost autonomous, meaning “sufficient” and seems to refer not only to the “remains of mind” but to the whole process of thinking and speaking. The overtones that can be heard by the sensitive listener are: it is enough, let there be a silent and motionless calm. To which is added a threefold “joy” when the narrator realises the situation when the activities of the mind and consequently of the words will be reduced to a mere meaningless “they” when “just enough” is in balance with “only”. That the two lines consisting of a single word are connected in some way

is suggested by the exclamation marks and the letters that they share: “Joy!” and “Only!”. The whole development of the argument not only functions on a logical “semantic” plane, but also on the plane on which the sounds, rhythms, and even melodies are operative:

Remains of mind then still.
 Enough still.
 Somewhose somewhere somehow
 enough still.
 No mind and words?
 Even such words.
 So enough still.
 Just enough still to joy.
 Joy!
 Just enough still to joy
 that only they.
 Only!

In paragraph 64 the reader is led from the word “leastward” (an echo of the title of the book) to the word “worst” via a process of intricate word play. The superficial meaning of the text is relatively simple within the context of *Worstward Ho*:

So leastward on.
 So long as dim still.
 Dim undimmed.
 Or dimmed to dimmer still.
 To dimmost dim.
 Leastmost in dimmost dim.
 Utmost dim.
 Leastmost in utmost dim.
 Unworsenable worst.

The narrator must go on until everything is reduced to its least state when the light is at its dimmest. The words that are repeated most frequently are “dim” (11

times) in the syntactic shape of noun, verb and adjective and, which is surprising, “most” (6 times), where one would expect the word “least” to be second in frequency. The coinages “dimmost” and “leastmost” express a puzzling paradox which seems to give a hint about the inexpressibility of the desired situation that the narrator is striving for. The reader travels in this short space through comparatives and superlatives, from “dim” via “dimmer” to “dimmost” and from “least” via “leastmost” to “utmost” and “worst”. The final result is that the word “most” is equated with the words “least” and “worst” semantically.

If one took paragraph 92 out of context in order to observe it as an autonomous text, the first line would present interpretation difficulties:

Nothing and yet a woman.
 Old and yet old.
 On unseen knees.
 Stooped as loving memory
 some old gravestones stoop.
 In that old graveyard.
 Names gone and when to when.
 Stoop mute over the graves of none.

One interpretation, for instance, could be that there is nothing to be seen and yet there is a woman visible. From earlier paragraphs, however, we know that this sentence in non-elliptical form would read: “there is nothing to show a woman and yet a woman.” Thus the second sentence would read: “there is nothing to show that this woman is old and yet she is old”. The fact that this “poem” starts with the word “nothing” even though it has a different meaning when the context is taken into consideration, colours the reading of the rest of the text. The phrase “on unseen knees” reinforces this effect. There is nothing and yet there is a kneeling old woman visible in a stooped posture. There are no knees and yet she sits on them. The image of this shade reminds one of a worshipping and praying person. The poem here makes a surprising turn when the poet introduces a remarkable simile. The kneeling old woman is stooped as some old gravestones in an old graveyard which the poet assumes the reader to be familiar with: “that old graveyard”. This simile could easily confuse the interpreter who is wrongly led to

believe that the woman is kneeling in a graveyard in front of a few gravestones. This, however, is not the case. The placing of the words “loving memory” in this phrase may muddle the issue even further. The question may be raised whether the posture of the kneeling old woman evokes the loving memory expressed by the gravestones in the old graveyard. In that case the line should be read as: Stooped as—loving memory—some old gravestones stoop. Or is the old woman herself a loving memory and does the fact that she is deceased (turned to nothingness) evoke the simile of the stooped gravestones? The matter becomes even more complicated when one reminds oneself that the words “loving memory” are a common gravestone inscription. Later in the poem we learn that these words, if it is true that they are engraved on the gravestones, are the only visible words left on them: “Names gone and when to when”. Pursuing this line of interpretation, it is possible to compose a picture of an old graveyard with weathered and stooped gravestones which have lost most of their engravings except “loving memory”. The gravestones in this simile, monuments to commemorate the deceased dear ones (loving memories), are not able to identify the persons buried at their feet anymore and therefore “stoop mute over the graves of none”. The last word of this “poem”, “none”, harks back to the first word, “nothing”, and the circle is complete. The underlying thought expressed by this “poem” is that nothing can eventually only be compared with nothing. The word “none” receives extra emphasis in this poem, not only because it is preceded by the word “nothing” but also because it rhymes with the word “gone” in the previous line.

There are more oddities of sound besides rhyme in this text, which add an interesting relief to the meaning. From beginning to end the =◆:= sounds permeate the text, starting with the cognate =☛= of “woman” and ending in “mute” via the words “stooped” and “stoop”. The word “mute” is first and foremost suggested by the effaced engravings on the gravestones. The use of this word suggests another metaphor in this section, viz. a personification of the gravestones. In other words, the speechless woman is compared to gravestones which by dint of their loss of engravings are also speechless.

Another interesting feature in this “poem” is the sequence of the word “old”. The first two times that it is used it refers to the physical appearance of the woman. The third time it occurs it denotes the physical appearance of the stooped gravestones. But the fourth time an extra dimension is added to its meaning when it

refers to the graveyard, where it not only denotes physically old but also, being modified by “that”, signifies an emotional attachment: “familiar”. The intricate way Beckett makes use of the various semantic facets of these words suggests that the lifeless objects are given personal dimensions which are immediately taken away from them in the conclusion of the “poem”.

SEMANTICS

In addition to rhyme, alliteration and assonance, an array of obvious as well as more subtle semantic connections contributes to the dense web of lexical chains woven of *Worstward Ho*’s very limited vocabulary. For example, virtually every word is linked with another through relationships of synonymy and antonymy. As one would expect there is a prominent lexical field centering around the concept of reduction: which includes the verbs *fade*, *dim*, *lessen*, *recede*, *cut off*, *fail* (used transitively in *Worstward Ho* in the sense of “making worse=better by reducing”), *worsen* (*idem*), *bring to naught*, *null*, *leasten*, as well as the adjectives *mere*, *small*, *least*, *leastmost*, *little*, *bounded*, *narrow*, *faint*, *dim*, *dimmer*, *dimmest*, *dimmost*; the adverbs *meremost*, *minimum*, *at most*, *dimly*, and the nouns *dim*, *remains*, *bounds*. Through the verb *worsen*, this lexical field partly overlaps with the one centered around *bad*: *poor*, *worse*, *worst*, *ill*, *crippled*, *wrong*, with the noun *flaw*. If we limit ourselves to adjectives in these two fields, the field of reduction connects with the antonyms *unlessenable*, *unworsenable*, *unlessable*, *unworseable*, *unnullable*; *unreceding*; *clear*; *boundless*, *vast*, *much*, *most*; the one centring around “bad” has *good*, and *true*.

Even this very brief look at *Worstward Ho*’s vocabulary involves as much as ten per cent of the total number of words, and shows only two of the ways in which they may be semantically connected. Like the overall vocabulary, the number of lexical fields is limited, and they are closely interconnected through overlap and contrast. The nature of these semantic fields provides its own clue to the book’s subject matter; their limited number and the resulting semantic density shows the single-mindedness of the narrator’s pursuit.

A more important subject to be discussed under the heading of semantics is that of meaning as the chief obstacle facing the narrator in his quest. It has already been remarked that where contemporary art was concerned, Beckett had little interest in representation. At the beginning of his writing career he expressed his admiration for artists who eschewed the notion that art was capable of expressing any-

thing. The form of art most true to itself was that which was completely devoid of reference to anything outside itself. The unavoidable semantic dimension inherent in the medium of language prevents a simple transfer of this attitude from painting to writing. Language cannot fail to signify. Language is a sign system, and of their nature words mean something, refer to something, even if that reference is flawed. “Painting and music”, Beckett said to Lawrence Harvey, “have so much better a chance.”³⁴

To corrupt the sign system, to manipulate it, to force it to bend to his will, is therefore central to Beckett’s pursuit in *Worstward Ho*. *Worstward Ho* is an exercise in establishing to what extent it is possible to sever the representational ties that bind language to our shared knowledge of the world. The representational ties between language and the world as we know it work in two directions: words will engender images of their reference in the mind of the hearer; and, *vice versa*, things and concepts from the world as we know it are capable of calling to mind the words that represent them. This bidirectional automatism of saying causing seeing and seeing causing saying (for saying read also writing, thinking) obviously severely hampers the imagination. In fact, pure imagination cannot exist: imagination will always be “contaminated” with memory (real-life experience), with which it is inextricably linked. The consequence is that any work of the imagination that employs language as its medium will inevitably be to a large extent representational. Pure imagination existing in a universe of its own is a quest which surfaces in much of Beckett’s writing, but which becomes ever more urgent towards the end of his life. Beckett’s narrator in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is exasperated by this problem:

Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. *If only she could be pure figment*. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. Where no more precautions to be taken. No precautions possible. Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. *If only all could be pure figment*. *Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be*. Gently gently. On. Careful. (p. 20; emphasis added)

In much of his fiction—but especially in the late fiction—Beckett and his narrators are at pains to explore the extent to which it is possible to break the ties

between language and our shared world. *Worstward Ho* represents the furthest extent to which Beckett ever managed to take his explorations. In *Worstward Ho* the narrator manages to convey so little information about the setting that it is extremely difficult to place the action in an intelligible world of any description. The lack of points of reference to a real world defeats the reader's expectation in the sense that he would normally assume to be able to be given enough clues, or means of orientation, to be able to extrapolate from them until a more or less complete or at least cohering world emerges.

This is not to say that Beckett simply dismisses language as a sign system. Language is not reduced to sounds or typographic marks on paper. Meaning—and the use of it in logical argument—is very much in evidence. Beckett makes use of the sign system as devised by convention, even when some of the words he uses have no pre-existing dictionary denotation. Words may have meaning in many ways, and it was suggested above that by dint of repetition of a limited number of words within the brief text of *Worstward Ho* conventional denotation, as well as connotation, of existing words was severely restricted. In the same way, the coinages Beckett introduces in *Worstward Ho* acquire a firm denotation, despite the fact that they are not part of a conventional sign system.³⁵

So successfully has the text managed to dampen all echoes of references to the non-fictional world that the very few places where they do occur stand out.³⁶ There is, for example, a reference to “the world [as it was] once” (36), which will be discussed in the section on Time below. The most problematic example (in that it has managed to confuse many critics) comes in the shape of a comparison, in 92.4, where the stooped posture of the old woman in the text is compared with the stoop of some old gravestones “in that old graveyard”. The gravestones are no more than the vehicle in the simile; they are firmly outside the world of the text. They constitute a two-tier appeal to our knowledge of the real world. Firstly they assume that the reader will have had occasion to observe that old gravestones sometimes “stoop”, i.e. lean towards the ground, and so that this knowledge will have become a connotation. It is to this connotation that the narrator here appeals. Secondly, since no graveyard has been mentioned before within the text, the demonstrative “that” in the phrase “in that old graveyard” will have to be interpreted as a reference, in the mind of the narrator, to a particular graveyard in the non-fictional world.³⁷

In the virtually complete absence of reference to the world outside its own universe, *Worstward Ho* comes very close to achieving Beckett's ideal of an art without occasion: that is to say, without reference in the phenomenal world. In *Worstward Ho* Beckett has come closest to the grail of his quest: an imaginary universe existing in an absolute void.

Beckett is fond of mining the resources of the English language. Beckett's style is characterised by the use of words dating from all periods of English from early modern locutions (such as "a pox on") to modern usage. Often his search for the right word leads to a curious mixing of registers, with archaisms and words from a range of specialist areas intermingling with the most ordinary and everyday usage. In *Worstward Ho* examples of words from a specialised register are the anatomical word "vertex" for the crown of the head; the literary "grot"; archaisms include: "naught"; "pain" as an intransitive verb; "a pox on"; "atween"; "atwain"; "whither".³⁸ Because the registers are thoroughly mixed, no single style gains the upper hand, and once again the words must stand on their own. The curious effect is that the individual words and phrases as it were hand over the power to arrest that would, in the context of more conventional writing, attach to them because of their register, to be harnessed in the service of the narrator's quest.

Manipulation of the signification of words is noticeable in many other devices Beckett uses in the text. Instead of using language to make statements about the non-fictional world, Beckett uses language to design a universe which has the fewest possible links with the phenomenal world. This means that the text adds specific connotations to words, which displace their dictionary denotations. Most of the words in *Worstward Ho* are everyday ones and belong to the basic vocabulary of the average English speaker, but through a number of strategies, like, for example, repetition, their normal denotative range of reference is increasingly restricted in the course of the text. Thus the meaning of phrases such as "the void" or "the hell of all" can only be properly understood in the context of the book. "The void" takes on the meaning of the mindspace, the backdrop of the "stage" where all thinking processes are visualised. The further the reader progresses in the book the less he is reminded of the original dictionary meaning of empty or vacant space and the easier it becomes to accept the paradox of an empty place filled with shades. It is as if the words become flesh: the shades become corporeal and the void becomes the physical realm in which they have their being. Similarly

“hell” does not primarily refer to the metaphysical concept of an abode in the after-life, neither is it used in the conventional sense of popular speech (“a hell of a life” etc.), but it refers primarily to the mind, and secondly to the characteristics of the human mind in general.

The extent to which the text itself defines the denotation of the words is well illustrated in 56. Here the narrator decides to use “they” for the “worsening words”, identified as “dim void shades”:

Now for to say as worst they may only they only they. Dim void shades all they. Nothing save what they say. Somehow say. Nothing save they. What they say. Whosoever whencesoever say. As worst they may fail ever worse to say. (56.4–11)

This amounts to a decision to give the word *they* a private reference: to make the word into a sign that is not a symbol, in the sense that it is not public.³⁹ The narrator does not finally act on his decision, presumably because this would lead to a hopeless confusion, which is undesirable in view of the need for strict logic. In 58 he mentions why he did not succeed: he still has enough mind “not to know what they say” (i.e., not to know what the words express). His mind compels him to continue to make sense, and “they” is not accepted by the mind because “they” does not make sense.⁴⁰

A similar case is that of the word “nohow”. This is an American locution, meaning “in no possible way”.⁴¹ In *Worstward Ho* it usually occurs in combination with “on” and when it occurs by itself, as it does a number of times from 69 onwards, “on” is implied, so that, by the end of the book, the denotation of *nohow* in *Worstward Ho* can be said to be “in no possible way on”. The exceptions are 70.7 and 95.13–15, where “nohow” is used to qualify other words. Such idiosyncratically formed words have no symbolic value as a sign (unless the sign creates its own symbolism).

Both “they” and “nohow” are existing words. In addition, quite a number of words and phrases are being redefined in the course of the book that would not normally be encountered in the syntactic use made of them in *Worstward Ho*. “That almost ring”, “the fore”, “the soft” and many other such phrases receive their denotation purely from their use and context within the book.

Beckett's fondness for puns can be traced throughout his *oeuvre*. Clichés and idioms are among Beckett's favourite ingredients for puns. A phrase such as "you may even believe yourself dead on condition you make no bones about it" (*TfN* IV, p. 84) is an example of an Irish bull, an inadvertent contradiction. The cliché of "to make no bones about something" and a sentence like "Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards" (*First Love*, p. 1) illustrate Beckett's preoccupation with matters of life and death, at the same time as they expose the cliché and make light of his preoccupation by employing a cliché. What Beckett has always done with clichés he continues to do in *Worstward Ho*.⁴² The cliché of having (no) time to lose forms the basis for a pun which demonstrates the absurdity of the situation the narrator is in:

For to gain time. Time to lose. Gain time to lose. (36.9–11)

In a still more subtle way the cliché that the eyes are windows of the soul becomes an underlying structuring device for the narrative:⁴³ the eyes become holes in the skull as windows are holes in a house:

Stare clamped to stare. Bowed backs blurs in stare clamped to stare. Two black holes. Dim black. In through skull to soft. Out from soft through skull. Agape in unseen face. That the flaw? The want of flaw? Try better worse set in skull. Two black holes in foreskull. Or one. Try better still worse one. One dim black hole mid-foreskull. Into the hell of all. Out from the hell of all. So better than nothing worse say stare from now. (88)

Resurrection of the dead language of clichés is a form of reimbuing words with life. Clichés are thoughts without thought; to subvert the cliché is to force thought back into the expression. By being encountered in an unexpected new usage, their meaning is redefined, and the new meaning is strengthened precisely because it is at variance with the connotations of the old usage.

A more complex example of how Beckett manipulates fixed expressions in *Worstward Ho* can be seen in the following example where the underlying structuring phrase is "soft in the head". Having been suggested by "dim", the word "soft" (both are adjectives applied to the intensity of light, here applicable to the

light of reason) is applied to the mind—however, not in a figurative but in a literal sense:

So leastward on. So long as dim still. Dim undimmed. Or dimmed to dimmer still. To dimmost dim. Leastmost in dimmost dim. Utmost dim. Leastmost in utmost dim. Unworsenable worst.

What words for what then? How almost they still ring. As somehow from some soft of mind they ooze. From it in it ooze. How all but uninane. To last unlessenable least how loath to leasten. For then in utmost dim to unutter leastmost all. (64–65)

Beckett's fondness of playing with paradoxes (like Irish bulls) extends to the oxymoron, which goes a step beyond the paradox in that the contrast is stronger. In *Worstward Ho* oxymorons include: "at rest plodding on"; "little much"; "on back"; "better worse"; "bettered for the worse"; "try fail"; "narrow vast".

TIME

In 36 the narrator introduces shortened forms to refer to the shades, to be used from now on, "For to gain time": "one" for "the kneeling one", "two" for "the twain", and "three" for "the head". The phrase "For to gain time" could be read as a relatively innocent one, expressing merely a desire for concision (and illustrating ellipsis at work). But the mention of the word time starts a brief train of thought leading to a reflection on "the world [as it was] once" or, in other words, to a time other than the present of the text. "For to gain time. Time to lose. Gain time to lose" is an ironic observation on the significance of time in the world: as something which may be gained, but only in order for it to be lost again. But if it is a sad fact of "the world" that time is gained only for it to be inevitably lost again, it is a problem in *Worstward Ho* that any time gained must somehow be lost again.⁴⁴

That language is used in *Worstward Ho* also to refer to time is hardly surprising. But the abundance of time references is remarkable. The entire text is riddled with direct time indicators, adverbs such as "on" (85 times), "now" (74 times) and "from now" (24 times), "again" (34 times), "still" (37 times), "sudden" (21 times), "till" (29 times), and a few nouns such as "future", "time" and "night". These

direct time indicators make up as much as ten per cent of the total of the text and more or less the same percentage of the number of words in *Worstward Ho*'s vocabulary. If we added to these words indirect time indicators which are mainly embedded in verbs and their conjugations, such as "go" (99 times), "worsen" (25 times), but also "back" (46 times) and "say" (122 times), then the total amount would increase to about 25 per cent of the whole text and about the same percentage of the vocabulary. This extraordinary density of words referring to time and progress of time leads one to conclude that the narrator is preoccupied with time and its passing. Indeed, the narrator frequently expresses that he wants the process to come to an end, the sooner the better. The phrase "better worse", which occurs 34 times (including once as "worse better"), functions as some kind of magical formula indicating that a new (improved) phase in the worsening process has started. In this sense that phrase, too, is a time indicator. The book's emphasis on time stresses the nature of the narrative as a process.

But some of the references to time in *Worstward Ho* are more than straightforward descriptions. In 38, for instance, the narrator draws attention to the extent to which even time is a linguistic construct. By simply saying, first "night", then "watch of night", then "rest of last watch", the narrator telescopes the time that remains for him to go on:

Say the night is young alas and take heart. Or better worse say still a watch of night alas to come. A rest of last watch to come. And take heart. (38.5–8)

That time is simply a matter of words is an observation also made by the Unnamable, on whom "they've inflicted the notion of time" too (p. 41):

I speak of the four seasons and the different parts of the day and night, the night has no parts, that's because you are asleep, the seasons must be very similar, perhaps it's springtime now, that's all words they taught me (*The Unnamable*, p. 125)

Language is capable of describing time, and thus of influencing the reader's perception of it, causing the same problems language always causes: that the words used come with their inbuilt preconceptions. But crucially for the narrator's pur-

pose, time is equally a *property* of language. Indeed, one of the essential differences between the visual arts and literature is that the latter, making use of language, is sequential and thus accompanied by time passing. This property of language lies at the heart of the mental exercise performed by the narrator of *Worstward Ho*.

The narrator explicitly draws attention to the temporal difference between speech (i.e., language) and vision. In 55 he proposes the possibility that in the absence of words, vision can be used “by way of somehow on” (55.3). However, he has to give up the idea. When the words are gone (i.e. when they temporarily cease) there is no way to go on and, vice versa, there is no way to go on when the words are gone (55.6–8). The reason why there is no way to go on is precisely that language is sequential. Along with the words, therefore, time also ceases: “Time gone when nohow on” (60.6). In other words, vision is not sequential, and does not help the process of going on; the *description* of vision (in language) is sequential and does help the process of going on. The narrator needs the words to continue, even if it is a continuation towards an end.

Here then, language offers the narrator a major strength that Beckett failed to mention when comparing his art so unfavourably to that of visual artists in the various treatises quoted above. While the visual arts are static, and thus (almost) synchronic, language is a sequential medium and diachronic. In *Worstward Ho* the narrator realises that this temporal property of language is more than a necessary evil; it may in fact be put to good use in the pursuit of nothingness by helping it simply to continue. Language goes where vision cannot go: on. “[T]ime devours on” as one of the *Texts for Nothing* has it (*TfN*, p. 107). Language is the personification of *tempus edax*.⁴⁵

Language, in addition to being accompanied by time passing, is strictly chronological, whether it is spoken, heard, written or read. But it is emphasised by the storyline of *Worstward Ho*, which is strictly chronological, without any flash-backs or flash-forwards. Moreover, despite a number of time indicators, time in *Worstward Ho* is primarily narrated time, which coincides almost completely with the narrative time. What the voice of the narrator speaks is the thoughts as they occur. (There is occasionally some speculation about future developments, and there are some references to a past “once” outside the time of the text’s setting. Still, even these speculations and references are given as they occur to the narrator in the narrative present.)

This chapter began by asserting that language presents Beckett with two major challenges in *Worstward Ho*: that of the innate but unwanted referentiality of language, and the fact that man has no control over the presence or absence of language. Both are inevitable functions of the powerlessness of the human mind to use language to rise above itself, since the mind, and thought, is language. The problem is an existential one, and Beckett's concerns fit in a venerable tradition of metaphysical thought on the matter. As Aquinas asserts, we can talk about God but not define him:

Aristotle says *words express thoughts and thoughts represent things*. So words refer mediately to things by way of our conceptions: we talk about things in the way we know them. Now in this life we know God only through creatures: as their non-creaturely transcendent cause. So our words for God do not express him as he is in himself. (In this they differ from words like *man* which express what a man is in himself; for we define the meaning of *man* by declaring what makes man man.) Our words for God then, express him in ways more appropriate to the material creatures we naturally know. ... [I]n this life we do not know him as he is in himself. In the same way, we use tensed verbs and participles to talk of God's eternity (which includes all time); for we can understand and express the simpleness of eternity only in terms of time's multiplicity [*He is, he was, and he always will be*].⁴⁶

In the absence of a "language of being", as in the absence of a language of God, there is only the language of the things of the world. The solution of the predicament requires an exploit like the Baron von Münchhausen pulling himself out of a swamp by his own hair.

Beckett's engagement with this predicament may be traced back in his *oeuvre* to at least *The Unnamable*. As a result a movement may be traced in Beckett's work, away from a representation of the world as we know it and towards a fictional world which bears but an intermittent resemblance to our own. Beckett achieves the lack of "occasion" in *Worstward Ho* mainly by redefining the words' relationship to the phenomenal world and our conception of it. This dissociation of the words from their conventional referents builds up a system of idiosyncratic reference within the work.

The unique style of *Worstward Ho* (even compared to other prose works of the same period) is a consequence of Beckett's unprecedented achievement in breaking the representational ties that bind language to our everyday world. The control over language that *Worstward Ho* represents is unrivalled. However, it could still be argued that the narrator's "success" in achieving his desired all but annihilation is ultimately a matter of faith, or at the very least takes place when reason can be left behind. The crucial moment takes place in the penultimate paragraph of the book, when

Enough. Sudden enough. Sudden all far. No move and sudden all far. (95.1-4)

It is true that the narrator has been experimenting with a sort of spiriting away out of his mind one or another of the shades throughout the book; narratively there is nothing new here. However, it is the assertion which attends this narrative leap, "Whence no farther. Best worse no farther. Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on", that represents the real leap of faith. For how is it possible to know that there is no farther and nohow on?

That *Worstward Ho* is a difficult text to read is not surprising in the circumstances. Through the agency of his narrator, Beckett employs a huge range of techniques and devices that all contribute towards the battering and boring of holes that are necessary for the achievement: extreme forms of ellipsis, limitation and iteration; the manipulation of the connotations and denotations of his vocabulary, etc. The difficulty is such that it leaves the reader foundering and trying to reconstitute syntax and other elementary formal linguistic characteristics whose presence in a text are normally taken for granted before he can even begin to assign meaning.

The narrator's control over language extends to the reader, who experiences a remarkable lack of freedom to imagine beyond the strict confines of the narrator's words. What is said (written) exists, both for the narrator's mind, and for the reader. Conversely, what is not written is non-existent. The mind contains nothing more than the words on paper. This is the accumulative effect of the host of techniques and devices employed by the narrator in his quest for annihilation. *Worstward Ho* is to be read on the narrator's terms or not at all. Any middle ground would result in grave misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

¹ David Lodge, *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*, London, 1966, p. 47. The point has often been made with reference to Beckett, for example by Richard N. Coe: “[S]tyle’ in any advanced literary language, but more especially in English, provides a reverberating ‘context’ of echoes, images, and associations—precisely the elements that Beckett wishes to avoid.” (in “Beckett’s English”, in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, ed. Morris Beja, S.E. Gontarski and Pierre Astier, Ohio State University Press, 1983, p. 39).

² Lawrence E. Harvey, “Beckett on Life and Art”, in *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic*, Princeton, 1970, p. 249.

³ Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, London, 1976, p. 128. The question of Mauthner’s “influence” on Beckett’s thinking is discussed by Geert Lernout in his essay “James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner and Samuel Beckett” (in *In Principle, Beckett is Joyce*, ed. Friedhelm Rathjen, Edinburgh, 1994, pp. 21–27).

⁴ Lawrence Harvey reports Beckett’s decision to switch to French in these words: “French represented a form of weakness by comparison with his mother tongue. Besides English because of its very richness holds out the temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity, which are merely words mirroring themselves complacently, Narcissus-like. The relative asceticism of French seemed more appropriate to the expression of being, undeveloped, unsupported somewhere in the depths of the microcosm” (*Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, p. 196). Note that here again Beckett mentions his quest for a language that may express “being”.

⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis*, [1933; English tra. 1958], New York, 1962, p. 126.

⁶ For example: “There floats up—into my thoughts—a Mr. Shower” (*Happy Days*, p. 31); “Strange thing, time like this, drift up into the mind” (*ibid.* p. 33).

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tra. C.K. Ogden, London, corr. edn, 1933, p. 79; cf. Mauthner’s “there is no distinguishing between the report and that which it is supposed to be a report of” from *Beiträge zu eine Kritik der Sprache*, quoted above. It is, as Descartes realised (see the second of his *Meditations on the First Philosophy*) the philosophical variant of the problem encountered by anyone who wishes to move the world, but is himself on it: “Give me somewhere to stand and I will move the earth”, as Archimedes is supposed to have put it.

⁸ Though it can be found elsewhere too. The void, for example, is both unworsenable (85) and unworseable (86). In practice the meaning of the two words is identical: “not capable of being made worse”. However, the former shows the perspective of the agent that is to make worse; the latter of the thing that is to be made worse.

⁹ This affects the reader’s perception of the narrator himself, too, who is more non-descript than ever before.

¹⁰ Cf “And the voices, wherever they come from, have no life in them” (*TfN*, p. 81); “lifeless words” (*TfN*, p. 112).

¹¹ According to Enoch Brater, Beckett used the same metaphor in 1984 when, on being asked if he was working on anything, he replied to a director he was working with in London: “Another blot on silence” (*The Drama in the Text*, p. 13).

¹² Documented, for example, by Dougald McMillan in his “Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts: The Embarrassment of Allegory”, in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S.E. Gontarski, New York, 1986.

¹³ Note that Beckett does not offer the possibility of simply painting in a non-expressive mode while

“blissfully unaware” of the predicament. Somehow distress is necessary for the genuine artist.

¹⁴ Andrew Renton: “Of course, there is always something to express. Beckett’s difficulty with writing, in fact, is that expression occurs despite itself” (CC, p. 168).

¹⁵ It will be noted that turning to fictional fantasy is not a solution to Beckett’s predicament. Fantasy uses the “worldliness” inherent in language to establish relations between the fantastic and the known world shared by writer and reader.

¹⁶ See Juliet, *Conversations*, *passim*.

¹⁷ Andrew Renton does so for the universe of *Worstward Ho* in his PhD thesis. Elsewhere, too, Renton observes that the later prose texts “become increasingly interconnected and self-referential” (“Disabled Figures: From the *Residua* to *Stirrings Still*”, in CC, p. 167). In *Unwording the World* (Philadelphia, 1990) Carla Locatelli writes that “[*Worstward Ho*] is perhaps the most dramatic and ‘beyondless’ revelation of a radically open ‘self-reflective’ artifact” (p. 266).

¹⁸ The opposite attitude to Renton’s is P.J. Murphy’s, who writes in “Beckett and Philosophy” that “the question of [the works’] reference to our world is the very problematic to be explored” (CC, p. 222)—though he does not appear to have *Worstward Ho* in mind.

¹⁹ “Fiction, by definition, creates what it describes and does not allow us to compare the original subject matter with the partial version embodied in the prose of the novel.” (Jonathan Raban, *The Technique of Modern Fiction: Essays in Practical Criticism*, London, 1968, pp. 135–36).

²⁰ Cf Harvey, who quotes Beckett’s phrase “syntax of weakness”, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, p. 249 (see also Ricks, pp. 6, 82).

²¹ See Chapter 1, “Argument”.

²² But the “closed space” tales are as hermetic as *Worstward Ho*.

²³ Cf “If a sign is *not necessary* then it is meaningless. That is the meaning of Occam’s razor” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.328).

²⁴ See the discussion of iconicity in Chapter 1, “The Argument of *Worstward Ho*”.

²⁵ As the Unnamable exhorts himself: “ellipse, it saves time” (p. 106).

²⁶ It is not suggested that Beckett applied ellipsis to an initially complete utterance. The term “construe” is used to refer to the average language user’s speculative action when following his intuitive desire to complete the missing elements and form a grammatical as well as contextually logical sentence which, however, necessarily remains hypothetical. The indestructible core of logic in Beckett’s language has been commented on before. As early as 1973 A. Alvarez wrote (on *How It Is*): “... despite its formidable appearance the work is always coherent, once the reader has laboriously tuned in to its difficult wave length. Even at its most disintegrated, when the shattered syntax is scarcely that of the gasp, there is a kind of clenched lucidity about Beckett’s writing that somehow justifies one’s efforts. Unlike, say Pound’s late Cantos, there is nothing slapdash or willful in *How It Is* [which is similarly elliptic in nature], and no trace of impossible private references. With patience and concentration, the reader need never be at a loss. The difficulties are all public and resolvable” (*Samuel Beckett*, New York, 1973, p. 67).

²⁷ That the narrator is serious about equating the phrase “say x” with “be said x”, here as elsewhere in the text, is amply testified by the surviving Reading TS. Not only is there the literal statement to that effect (which has not survived into print): “Say a body. Say ~~short~~ for be said” (TS1 3 <2a>). But the opening of the actual surviving section 3 shows “Say a body” deleted in favour of “Be said a body”, deleted in its turn in favour of “Say a body”.

²⁸ In 6.10, 56.4, 56.11, 63.5 and 63.6 the full infinitive “to say” is used.

²⁹ And note that manuscript B has the phrase “Preying praying” (83).

³⁰ Cf also “Into dark whole again” in *A Piece of Monologue*, *CSPlays*, p. 269.).

³¹ The first ms draft of 8.3 has “No nothing no”, which is amended to “Know nothing no not now”, if any evidence of deliberateness were needed.

³² Cf. “But it will end, a desinence will come, or the breath fail better still, I’ll be silence, I’ll know I’m silence, no, in the silence you can’t know, I’ll never know anything” (*TfN* VIII, p. 97).

³³ It is odd that the two times “vertex vertical” is used, they refer to different shades, first to shade three (in 10.4) and then to one in 25.8.

³⁴ Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, p. 249.

³⁵ Examples of coinages in *Worstward Ho* include: dimmost; leastmost; uninane; leastening; unsunk; foreskull; unmoreable; hindtrunk; unutter; meremost; thenceless; beyondless. Many make use of existing roots, to which Beckett adds productive pre- and suffixes.

³⁶ In the first manuscript draft (A) there were more—for example, “water mattress”, “nightlight”—but they are deleted after manuscript A because of their overt “occasion”—and perhaps also for their capacity to date the text.

³⁷ The occurrence of this instance of “occasion” is very surprising in the context of the narrative. Though this is entirely speculative, many of the words in the section have an emotional loading, and the reference may well have an emotional cause.

³⁸ Christopher Ricks discusses in detail Beckett’s use of archaisms, clichés, and his deft use of register in general in *Beckett’s Dying Words*.

³⁹ It is also an example of iconicity; see Chapter 1, “Argument”.

⁴⁰ Beckett’s linguistic anxiety often centres around pronouns. This semantically nearly completely void but so frequently used class of words calls most attention to the inherent shortcomings of language. The most poignant linguistic tool clarifying the link, and bridging the gap, between the worlds of object and subject is the word “what”. “What” encompasses language’s potential reference to the entire world of facts and things. Small wonder, therefore, that this word is at the core of Beckett’s *oeuvre*.

⁴¹ Cf *OED*, meaning 1: “In no manner, by no means; not at all”.

⁴² Again, in *Beckett’s Dying Words* Christopher Ricks has an excellent discussion of Beckett’s use of clichés (see esp. pp. 62 ff.), especially in relation to the subject of his book, the way Beckett’s beliefs about life and death found their way into his writing.

⁴³ As, for example, section 59 of *Ill Seen Ill Said* shows, Beckett was much preoccupied with the eye–window equation.

⁴⁴ The word “time” has been used in 9, also to refer to a past situation where different rules applied.

⁴⁵ See also Harvey’s discussion on Beckett’s use of *tempus edax* in his poetry (*Samuel Beckett Poet and Critic*, pp. 207–11). Harvey suggests that Beckett may well have been indebted to Swift’s “On Time”: “Ever eating, never cloying, / All-devouring, all-destroying, / Never finding full repast, / Till I eat the world at last.”

⁴⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. and tra. Timothy McDermott, London, 1989, p. 30 (13.1).

Chapter 3

ROOTS

Beckett's biographer James Knowlson gives an account of how Beckett in 1976 met the American composer Morton Feldman, who wanted him to write a text to set to music. On that occasion Beckett jotted down what he called the only theme he had in his life. On a sheet of Feldman's music paper Beckett wrote:

To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable non-self. (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 631)

Feldman's request resulted in the opera *neither*, set to the 87-word text which Beckett wrote for Feldman on this theme. For an understanding of his work the significance of Beckett's remark that the concern of *neither* is with his "only theme" can hardly be overestimated.

What is the theme of *neither*? The full text of the libretto, which Beckett sent to Feldman less than a month after their meeting in Berlin, is as follows:

to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow

from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither

as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again

beckoned back and forth and turned away

heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other

unheard footfalls only sound

till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other

then no sound

then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither

unspeakable home

The speaker describes a constant coming and going between the inner world of self and the outer world of other, which are both impenetrable: two lit refuges whose doors alternately open and close. Attracted by the gleam of light from one refuge he is rebuffed by the door closing as he nears it, and turns towards the gleam of light from the other refuge, only to find its door closing in turn. This come and go comes to an end in the attainment of a state where the notions of self and non-self cease to be significant: “neither”. No longer moving between self and unself, their gleams of light stop alternating, and instead a gentle light “unfades” on that “unheeded neither”: the speaker has arrived at his “unspeakable home”.

As the use of the words “self” and “unself” indicates, the question of identity lies at the heart of Beckett’s concern in *neither*. The year before he wrote *neither*, Beckett referred to this question of identity as a crisis, in a conversation with Charles Juliet:

Returning to the discussion of his publications, he acknowledges that he has increasingly eliminated himself from his writing.

—In the end, you don’t know who is speaking any more. The subject disappears completely. That’s the end result of the identity crisis. (p. 157)

The constant movement in *neither* between self and unself depicts the search for an understanding of the relationship between self and “unself”, between I and they, between subject and object, between the individual and the world in which he lives. The fruitless coming and going between these twin poles, the eternal to and fro of existence, on the one hand, and the longing for it to end on the other: those are the two preoccupations in Beckett’s *oeuvre* from the Trilogy onwards, including, notably, *Worstward Ho*.

It is proposed in this chapter to examine the thesis that it is the tension between these two preoccupations—the ceaseless come and go between self and unself on

the one hand and the longing for it to end on the other—that sparks almost all of Beckett’s writing, and that *Worstward Ho* comes closest to relieving that tension for good, thus forming the unmistakable culmination of the *oeuvre*.

Without a doubt this tension receives its fullest expression in *The Unnamable*, the last of the novels of what has become known as the Trilogy. The Trilogy—Beckett’s most sustained piece of writing—was written in the extraordinarily fertile period of the five years after Beckett’s “revelation” in the summer of 1946, dramatised in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. The connection between that revelation and Beckett’s immense production in the subsequent years has often been remarked but it bears repeating in the present context. Beckett spoke to Charles Juliet twice about the turning point his revelation constituted. The second time was in 1973:

In 1946, he returned to Ireland, and it was during this visit that he experienced the revolution in thinking which was radically to modify his approach to writing and his conception of narrative.

– Was this realization something progressive or did it come to you in a flash? He speaks of a crisis, of moments of sudden revelation.

– Up to that point, I had thought I could rely on knowledge. That I had to equip myself intellectually. That day, it all collapsed.

His own words come back to me and I quote them to him: “I wrote *Molloy* and the rest on the day I understood my stupidity. Then I began to write down what I feel”.

He smiles and nods.

It happened one night. As so often, he was prowling around alone and found himself at the end of a jetty buffeted by storm-force winds. At that moment, everything seemed to fall into place: the years of doubt, of searching and questioning and failure (in a few days’ time he would be forty) suddenly made sense and it was dazzlingly clear what he had to do.

– I caught a glimpse of the world I had to create to be able to breathe.

He began writing *Molloy* while still staying with his mother. ...

Between this point and 1950, he was borne along by a veritable frenzy of creation as he produced *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, *En attendant Godot*, *L’innommable* and *Textes pour rien*—the only works which find grace in his eyes. He regards the pieces generated after 1950 as mere sketches.¹

“*Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, *En attendant Godot*, *L’innommable* and *Textes pour rien*—the only works which find grace in his eyes” all came from the same spring, tapped by that momentous change in Beckett’s attitude to writing. Beckett would henceforth draw only on his own inner world for his subjects, and the outside world would be forever relegated to the idealist plane: “a projection of the individual’s [i.e., Beckett’s] consciousness”² and unknowable.

In writing what he felt, from a position of “stupidity”, replacing all attempts at competence, ability, and knowledge by darkness, poverty, and failure, Beckett was actually embracing his own “dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence”³ and adopting precisely the attitude to art which he was to impute to the Dutch painter Bram van Velde. In his *Three Dialogues* of 1949 Beckett described Van Velde (whom he had met shortly before the war) as the paragon of the new artist, who for the first time turns from “the plane of the feasible ... in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road”.⁴ What romantic authors half a century before him could still more or less successfully attempt to express aesthetically had, in Beckett’s view, become a fruitless venture in the post-war world. He regarded Van Velde as “the first to desist from this estheticised automatism, the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living” (p. 125)

Beckett himself admits that this view of Van Velde as an artist is a projection, that it is no more than what he (Beckett) is “pleased to fancy [Van Velde] is, fancy he does, and ... that it is more than likely that he is and does quite otherwise”.⁵ Especially the emphasis on failure is more applicable to Beckett’s own artistic medium, which is so much more intractable than Van Velde’s paint: words. Substituting Beckett for Van Velde and one medium for another,

The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot [write], since he is obliged to [write]. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event [writes] since he is obliged to [write]. (*Three Dialogues*, p. 119)

Apart from the works already mentioned, in that intensely creative period of five or six years Beckett also wrote *Mercier et Camier*, *The Expelled*, *The Calmative*, *First Love*, *The End*, and *Eleutheria*, as well as some smaller pieces. But the problem of the impenetrability of identity is most explicitly discussed in *The Unnamable*. As its title already hints, *The Unnamable*, is about the quest of a nameless mind in search of a self which remains unnamable, because external influences (the voices of the non-self) keep interfering. It is no exaggeration to claim that *The Unnamable* provides the fertile thematic substratum to almost all of the theatrical and prose works that follow it. It was written after the completion of the other two novels of what has become known as the Trilogy, *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, and the play *Waiting for Godot*, in 1949 and 1950, just before the death of Beckett's mother, and towards the end of that productive period that Beckett referred to as the "siege in the room".⁶ The appellation also aptly describes the Unnamable's own predicament, with his mind inside the chamber of the skull besieged by an interminable proliferation of unidentifiable voices.

Beckett started writing *The Unnamable* as a sequel to the former two trilogy novels with another M personage in mind: Mahood. But in the writing process the novel took a different direction. The main character of the novel is the nameless narrator himself: "All these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone. ... It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time" (p. 19). However, before he reaches his goal of speaking of himself the narrator is side-tracked into telling yet again a number of fables about others: Mahood, who like some picaresque or romantic version of Odysseus aimlessly travels the world and finds his entire family poisoned on his return home, and Worm who, memberless and unable to communicate, resides in a jar where he is looked after by a woman called Madeleine or Marguerite. The other fables that follow these ramblings come deceptively close to being about the narrator himself but as they unfold, each time it becomes apparent that their personae are yet again inventions of the narrator. They deal with remnants of memories and the life that the narrator may or might have had. In one fable the narrator goes back to the town of his youth in order to kill his mother. In another he imagines himself crawling in and out of a little hole in the wilderness. In another again he carries water from one vessel to another and in the last one he conceives

of himself as a prisoner in an enormous prison. But the nameless narrator realises that they are obstacles preventing him from achieving his one and only narrative, the one which is genuinely his own and which, by saying himself, will put an end to everything. Till then he must go on saying the words:

as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my own story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I... (*The Unnamable*, p. 132)

The helpless passivity that speaks from these phrases is symptomatic of the narrator's predicament. The only words that are available to him are, as he never stops complaining, *their* words—that is to say, the words he has learned from the world: “I'm in words, made of words, others' words” (p. 104). Being “others' words”, they keep confusing him about his identity. They blur the distinction between the narrator's self and the world around him by the heavy burden of their origin that they carry:

Who would ever think, to hear me, that I've never seen anything, never heard anything but their voices? And man, the lectures they gave me on men, before they even began trying to assimilate me to him! What I speak of, what I speak with, all comes from them. It's all the same to me, but it's no good, there's no end to it. It's of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step towards silence and the end of madness, the madness of having to speak and not being able to, except of things that don't concern me, that don't count, that I don't believe, that they have crammed me full of to prevent me from saying who I am, where I am, and from doing what I have to do in the only way that can put an end to it, from doing what I have to do. How they must hate me! Ah a nice state they have me in, but still I'm not their creature, not quite, not yet. ... But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll

be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with. And I'll be myself at last, as a starveling belches his odourless wind, before the bliss of coma. But who, they? Is it really worth while inquiring? With my clogged means? No, but that's no reason not to. On their own ground, with their own arms, I'll scatter them, and their miscreated puppets. Perhaps I'll find traces of myself by the same occasion. That's decided then. (*The Unnamable*, pp. 40–41)

The parallel between the identity crisis of *The Unnamable's* narrator and what the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset describes in *Man and Crisis*⁷ as one of the causes of the besetting problem of western civilization in the twentieth century is striking. Man's problem, Ortega says, is that he is fed with the voices of others until he no longer knows where his thoughts come from:

We have abandoned ourselves to other people and we live in a state of otherness, constantly deceiving and defrauding ourselves. We are afraid of our own life, which is synonymous with solitude, and we flee from it, from its genuine reality, from the effort it demands; we hide our own selves behind the selves of other people, we disguise ourselves behind society. (*Man and Crisis*, p. 92)

Ortega explains what he regards as the crisis in twentieth-century thinking in these terms:

[T]he man who is too cultivated and socialized, who is living on top of a culture which has already become false, is in urgent need of another culture, that is to say a culture which is genuine. But this can only start in the sincere and naked depths of his own personal self. Therefore he must go back to make contact with himself. But this cultivated self, the culture which he has received from without, and which is now decrepit and devoid of evidence, prevents him from doing this. That which seems so simple—to be one's self—becomes a terrible problem. (*Ibid.*, pp. 100–101)

This, Ortega asserts, is indeed the besetting problem of our century. Ortega dramatizes the effect on identity of the process by which we attempt to function in

society, and the resulting problematic relations between the individual's I and society's they, and it is as if he had enlisted the Unnamable to elaborate his point:

My opinions consist in repeating what I hear others say. But who is that "other," those "others," to whom I entrust the task of being me? Oh—no specific person! Who is it that says what "they say"? Who is the responsible subject of that social saying, the impersonal subject of "they say"? Ah—people! And "people" is not this person or that person—"people" is always someone else, not exactly this one or that one—it is the pure "other," the one who is nobody. "People" is an irresponsible "I", the "I" of society, the social "I". When I live on what "they say" and fill my life with it, I have replaced the I which I myself am in solitude with the mass "I"—I have made myself "people". Instead of living my own life, I am *de-living* it by changing it to otherness. (*Ibid.*, pp. 92–93)

The difference between Ortega and the narrator of *The Unnamable* is of course that for the Unnamable it is the very texture of language, the words themselves that cause the problem, while for Ortega the problem appears more like one of intellectual laziness. For the Unnamable the problem of self constitutes an existential problem; for Ortega it is a problem of the historical era in which he lives: the twentieth century. Ortega can speak in the active where Beckett has the Unnamable speak in the passive voice, helpless victim to the meanings foisted upon him by the words. Yet Ortega resorts to the same words as Beckett to make his point dramatically, down to the "come and go" between self and unself:

[O]ur life comes and goes between the two ways [of life]; at any moment it is an equation between what we are on our own account—what we think, feel, do with complete genuineness—and what we are on account of people, of society. (*Ibid.*, p. 93)

For most people the coming and going between "I" and "they", the others, and the resulting struggle mainly takes place outside their awareness; for the Unnamable, it fills his awareness so completely and to so little avail that he becomes fixated on the words themselves and their reference. Pronouns are of course

the main obstacles which prevent him from getting a clearer picture of the relation between self and non-self:⁸

you speak of yourself, someone speaks of himself, that's it, in the singular, a single one, the man on duty, he, I, no matter... (*The Unnamable*, p. 122)

In these few words the source of the voices is referred to by means of three pronouns: you, he and I.

[A]ll here is sin, you don't know why, you don't know whose, you don't know against whom, someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it's a kind of pronoun too... (*The Unnamable*, pp. 121–22)

The most problematic pronoun is no doubt the one for the first person singular. If language is the language of the world, how can anyone ever hope to use it to express the self? By using the language of the unself, i.e., the world, the “I” that can be expressed is never more than a construction of the world, an invention, if we prefer. Such a wordly “I” should therefore more properly be referred to as “he”:

I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. Anything to please them. It will make no difference. Where I am there is no one but me, who am not. So much for that. Words, he says he knows they are words. But how can he know, who has never heard anything else? True. (*The Unnamable*, p. 72)

However ill-equipped language may be for investigations into the relation between the self and the phenomenal world—let alone investigations into the nature of the self—it is the only available instrument and Beckett's narrators all have in common that they realise the hopelessness of the task. Yet in the face of this hopelessness they must nevertheless continue. *The Unnamable* realises that he must speak of things of which he cannot speak while at the same time being obliged to continue speaking:

Unfortunately I am afraid, as always, of going on. For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning again, a stranger first, then little by little the same as always, in another place, where I shall say I have always been, of which I shall know nothing, being incapable of seeing, moving, thinking, speaking, but of which little by little, in spite of these handicaps, I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always, the same which seems made for me and does not want me, which I seem to want and do not want, take your choice, which spews me out or swallows me up, I'll never know, which is perhaps merely the inside of my distant skull where once I wandered, now am fixed, lost for tininess, or straining against the walls, with my head, my hands, my feet, my back, and ever murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time. (*The Unnamable*, pp. 18–19.)

This theme of the obligation to speak, this need to go on saying the words is connected several times by the narrator with the term “pensum”:

Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation. I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is. But was I ever told? (*The Unnamable*, p. 26)

The notion—even the very words—of the need to go on as a “pensum” points directly to the work of Schopenhauer, whose work Beckett was intimately familiar with and whose philosophy suffuses *The Unnamable*.⁹ Knowlson quotes from a letter Beckett wrote to Tom MacGreevy in 1930:

I am reading Schopenhauer. Everyone laughs at that. ... But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. An intellectual justification of unhappiness—the greatest that has ever been attempted—is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi and Proust rather than in Carducci and Barrès. (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 118)

Whether or not Beckett was reading Schopenhauer as philosophy, he was sufficiently impressed by what he read to allow it to be a prominent presence in his subsequent writings. As Rupert Wood remarks, “*Proust* often reads like an encounter between Beckett and Schopenhauer, with Proust’s novel supplying pertinent material for a philosophical essay” (*op. cit.*, p. 3). But *The Unnamable* too is hugely indebted to Schopenhauer; “Yes, I have a pensum to discharge...” sounds like a direct translation of Schopenhauer’s phrase from his essay “Vom Leiden der Welt” (On the Suffering of the World): “Das Leben ist ein Pensum zum Abarbeiten”. Schopenhauer explains his notion of life as a pensum at greater length:

[L]ike the children of libertine fathers, we come into the world already encumbered with guilt and [...] it is only because we have continually to atone for this guilt that our existence is so wretched and its end is death. Nothing is more certain than that, generally speaking, it is the grievous *sin of the world* which gives rise to the manifold and great *suffering of the world* ... The story of the Fall is consequently the only thing which reconciles me to the Old Testament; I even regard it as the sole metaphysical truth contained in that book, even though it does appear clothed in allegory. For our existence resembles nothing so much as the consequence of a misdeed, punishment for a forbidden desire. (*Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 49)

The “intellectual justification of unhappiness” Schopenhauer provided was immensely important for Beckett on the personal plane. But Schopenhauer provided Beckett with much more than a formative personal reading experience. *Proust* has already been named. In his conclusion to the essay Beckett identifies the narrator’s ultimate revelation as a result of listening to a particular piece of music:

The narrator ... sees in the red phrase of the Septuor... the ideal and immaterial statement of the essence of a unique beauty ... the “invisible reality” that damns the life of the body on earth as a pensum and reveals the meaning of the word: “defunctus”. (*Proust*, p. 93)

Between 1978 and 1980, shortly before he began writing *Worstward Ho* in 1981, Beckett once again wrote down a number of quotations from Schopenhauer in a

notebook. The first of these was: “Das Leben ist ein Pensum zum Abarbeiten: in diesem Sinne ist *defunctus* ein schöner Ausdruck. (Schopenhauer, *Vom Leiden der Welt*.)”¹⁰ In the later drama, prose and poetry Schopenhauer’s presence may be less obtrusive than in *Proust*, but it is always clearly discernible.

Being burdened with a pensum nothing is more natural than to desire it to end. If the problem of the impenetrability of identity, coupled with the need to continue to attempt to penetrate it, is one of the twin poles of the theme in Beckett’s *oeuvre*, the longing for an end to the pensum of having to “come and go” in the world is the other. *The Unnamable*’s narrator stumbles on listening to the voices, not sure whether they are his own or those of the others in the world, and at all times trying to achieve the solitude in which his own self can reveal itself to him:

I am not heading anywhere, my adventures are over, my say said, I call that my adventures. And yet I feel not. And indeed I greatly fear, since my speech can only be of me and here, that I am once more engaged in putting an end to both. Which would not matter, far from it, but for the obligation, once rid of them, to begin again, to start again from nowhere, from no one and from nothing and win to me again, to me here again, by fresh ways to be sure, or by the ancient ways, unrecognizable, at each fresh faring. ... And yet I do not despair of one day sparing me, without going silent. And that day, I don’t know why, I shall be able to go silent, and make an end, I know it. Yes, the hope is there, once again, of not making me, not losing me, of staying here, where I said I have always been, but I had to say something quick, of ending here, it would be wonderful. But is it to be wished? Yes, it is to be wished, to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am. (*The Unnamable*, p. 18)

To end would be wonderful, but what does it mean, “to end”? For the narrator of *The Unnamable* it is to go silent. For the speaker of *neither* it is the realisation that neither the self nor the “unself” are capable of offering refuge in the search for identity; peace, including the absence of sound, descends only when the search ends. There is no question that this end can in any simple way be equated with death, yet the similarity is too obvious for the comparison to be ignored altogether.

Again we may turn to Schopenhauer for ideas on the matter, and again it is not unlikely that Beckett may have borrowed some of his from this source. According to Schopenhauer, death does not mean annihilation: “In truth ... the continual coming into existence of new beings and the annihilation of already existing ones is to be regarded as an illusion produced by a contrivance of two lenses (brain-functions) through which alone we can see anything at all: they are called space and time, and in their interpenetration causality” (“On the Indestructability of Our Essential Being by Death”, *Essays*, p. 68). Rather it involves the return of the human being to his primal state, “from which life has been only a brief absence” (*ibid.*, p. 70). In that primal state we lack the consciousness that characterises the term of our being alive and the intellect which has shaped it, but our “*cognitionless* primal state ... is not ... simply an *unconscious* state but rather one elevated above that form, a state in which the antithesis of subject and object falls away, because that which is to be known would here be actually and undividedly one with that which knows and the basic condition of all cognition (which is precisely this antithesis) would be lacking” (*ibid.*, p. 72). This cognitionless primal state, in which the antithesis of subject and object falls away, is what Beckett refers to as “being”:

“Insofar as one *is*, there is no material,” said Beckett. If one remains at this deep level of the need to make, one can’t perceive objects, one is shut away from the world. In this realm “the writer is like a foetus trying to do gymnastics.” ... “[T]here is a form, but it doesn’t move, stand upright, have hands. Yet it must have its form. Being *has* a form. Someone will find it someday. Perhaps I won’t, but someone will. It is a form that has been abandoned, left behind, a proxy in its place.” While the situation of a writer caught in such a dilemma is a distressing one, it also has about it the excitement of exploration and discovery. “Being,” according to Beckett, has been excluded from writing in the past. The attempt to expand the sphere of literature to include it, which means eliminating the artificial forms and techniques that hide and violate it, is the adventure of modern art. Someday someone will find an adequate form, a “syntax of weakness.” ¹¹

The language of being, the “syntax of weakness” capable of talking of this mystical synthesis, might well be silence. This is the Unnamable’s end:

... perhaps I'm at the door, that would surprise me, perhaps it's I, perhaps somewhere or other it was I, I can depart, all this time I've journeyed without knowing it, it's I now at the door, what door, what's a door doing here, it's the last words, the true last... perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again, dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on ... it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (*The Unnamable*, p. 132)

At the end of *The Unnamable*, the narrator stands on the threshold of his silence, and the “unspeakable home” of *neither* might well be within reach. But the reader will never know, either whether the narrator does indeed succeed in reaching his silence or, if he does, what it is like, since it is unspeakable. That is to say, the language he has at his disposition cannot describe it.

The Texts for Nothing again express a strong longing for the real self to be discovered and for the penum to end. The narrator in the *Texts for Nothing* seems increasingly concerned with “this pell-mell babel of silence and words” (p. 91). In *Text X* the narrator admonishes himself to “[g]ive up” but realises that “... it's all given up, it's nothing new, I'm nothing new” (p. 104). Somewhere someone is uttering inanities, but he wonders “is that enough ... to make sense?” The narrator is fed up with the “wordshit” and thinks of a way how to handle the words.

No, no souls, or bodies, or birth, or life, or death, you've got to go on without any of that junk, that's all dead with words, with excess of words, they can say nothing else, they say there is nothing else, that here it's that and nothing else ... (*TfN X*, p. 105)

This moment of insight, which indeed looks forward to Beckett's later experiments with words and how he can make them as inane as possible, however, does

not lead to any progress in the *Texts for Nothing*, for he cannot really envisage how employing an “excess of [inane] words” can be maintained in the long run before they also become “junk”:

but [the words] won't say it eternally, they'll find some other nonsense, no matter what, and I'll be able to go on, no, I'll be able to stop, or start, another guzzle of lies but piping hot, it will last my time, it will be my time and place, my voice and silence, a voice of silence, the voice of my silence. (*TfN*, X, p. 105)

In the last of the *Texts for Nothing* the words seem to peter out and at the end the text suggests that the voice comes very close to silence; it is definitely fainter than the last words of the Unnamable:

And were the voice to cease quite at last, the old ceasing voice, it would not be true, as it is not true that it speaks, it can't speak, it can't cease. And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place, born of the impossible voice the unmakeable being, and a gleam of light, still all would be silent and empty and dark, as now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs. (*TfN*, XIII, p. 115)

In the *Texts for Nothing* the narrator comes very close to the text that Beckett wrote almost thirty years later as *Worstward Ho*. Almost all *Texts for Nothing* show indications that they are, to borrow John Pilling's phrase, “forward-looking” to *Worstward Ho*.¹² “Who can the greater can the less” says the weakening old voice of *Text XIII* and continues: “once you've spoken of me you can speak of anything, up to the point where, up to the time when, there it dies, it can't go on, it's been its death, speaking of me, here or elsewhere, it says, it murmurs” (p. 113). This sounds like a programme for a text such as the one Beckett eventually entitled *Worstward Ho*.

From *The Unnamable* on, we see a narrator groping for a means to end it all on the one hand, while on the other continuing to invent rambling fictions by means of imagined and remembered scenes precisely because any attempt to end is doomed to fail. He veers back and forth between the world of reality which he abhors, and

the world of silence which he yearns for but cannot enter, since the old world keeps imposing itself through the words. The achievement of silence at the end of *The Unnamable* might have provided an expressive challenge for a romantic writer, but for Beckett it does not: his narrator is faced with the frustration that a verbal expression of that experience is a contradiction in terms, and so doomed to fail.

Having made so painfully clear the helplessness of the writer in the face of his intractable tools, and if the language of being is indeed silence, why does Beckett continue to write after he has achieved the failure of *The Unnamable*? The Unnamable's own statement at the beginning of the novel may give the answer:

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never. (*The Unnamable*, p. 8)

Unsurprisingly, this echoes Beckett on Van Velde. The artistic act, according to Beckett,

is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event [writes] since he is obliged to [write]. (*Proust*, p. 119)

To Georges Duthuit's question why the artist is obliged to paint (write), Beckett simply answers, "I don't know" (p. 119).

From the Trilogy on, Beckett has spent his writing time trying neither to express exclusively the phenomenal world nor to probe exclusively the world of self. With words he kept on manoeuvring somewhere in between these two realms, the "come and go", trying to achieve that state "in which the antithesis of subject and object falls away". Since a writer has no other tools, he has to make do with words, to which all Beckett's characters have the same ambiguous attitude as the narrator of the *Texts for Nothing*:

Ah to know for sure, to know that this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is no silence and barely mur-

mured words. Or, to know it's life still, a form of life, ordained to end, as others ended and will end, till life ends, in all its forms. Words, mine was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words, my viewless form described as ended, or to come, or still in progress, depending on the words, the moments, long may it last in that singular way. Apparitions, keepers, what childishness, and ghouls, to think I said ghouls, do I as much as know what they are, of course I don't, and how the intervals are filled, as if I didn't know, as if there were two things, some other thing besides this thing, what is it, this unnamable thing that I name and name and never wear out, and I call that words. It's because I haven't hit on the right ones, the killers, haven't yet heaved them up from that heart-burning glut of words, with what words shall I name my unnamable words? And yet I have high hopes, I give you my word, high hopes, that one day I may tell a story, hear a story, yet another ... I'll close my ears, close my mouth and be grave. And when they open again it may be to hear a story, tell a story, in the true sense of the words, the word hear, the word tell, the word story ... I give you my word. (*TfN*, VI, pp. 91–92)

The narrator still entertains some notion that the words may lead to another story, which might be about the self, and thus be the final story. Yet at the same time the text hints at the impossibility: “with what words shall I name my unnamable words?” He realises that he has not “hit on the right ones, the killers” yet and even though narrators in Beckett's later writings will keep on searching for the right key-words, the final result is never the complete silence they so desire. Words will keep the narrator company, bad company perhaps, until that unnamable moment arrives in which nothingness sets in.

Given that there is no choice but to continue, with words that continue to express, the writer's way forward would seem blocked. Beckett's creative solution to the impasse, it was suggested in Chapter 2, “Language”, is to attack the words themselves. The flux of language cannot be stopped, neither does it appear capable of achieving the desired end, but it can be tampered with, and perhaps be manipulated into abandoning its power to express, reaching the desired silence by that route. And that is what Beckett henceforward concentrates on. By means of all kinds of verbal experiments Beckett attempts to sever the words from the phenomenal world until the loss of expressive power effectively results in silence.

In a lecture given to a baffled audience of students of literature at The Hague in 1973, Evert van der Starre speculated about the “future” of Beckett’s writing:

Looking back at the series of texts produced so far by Beckett, we can observe that he apparently holds the view that he has not yet found the “real” ending, seeing that he is still publishing new material. However, it can be assumed that one day the end of the series will be reached. This may happen because of physical circumstances, e.g. because of the author’s death. It is also possible that he will stop publishing one day, but this fact does not allow us to draw a conclusion. It could be that, having realised the futility of his attempts, he decided to be silent, or it could be that he stopped because he discovered what he was looking for, but found it to be beyond words. Perhaps he will choose an intermediate solution and one day publish a book in which the solution is printed on fine white paper, in equally fine and equally white letters.¹³

In the sixties and seventies—after each new publication—critics speculated about the direction that Beckett’s writing would take. It is not easy to imagine their confusion, now that we have the completed *oeuvre* on our bookshelves. Beckett was often but vainly consulted by critics when asked which direction his writing was to take or whether there would be any new material for publication. According to John Calder, Beckett lived his life in the conviction that he could die at any moment. “Of everything he said it was going to be the last book. *How It Is* was going to be the last book. He said he didn’t have anything else to write. He very often said: ‘I don’t feel I have anything to write anymore’. And then he went on to write several other things.”¹⁴ Now that the author has died, the *oeuvre* misleadingly suggests a logical and even organic development and it is difficult to conceive that neither author nor critics knew what the following step would be in the development of Beckett’s writing. In the above quotation, however, Van der Starre gives us an idea of what predictions were conceivable in the early seventies on the basis of the existing texts. In this period the author had just received the Nobel Prize (a prize usually awarded to authors at the end of their careers) and he was approaching seventy. This physical fact suggested that his production could stop at any moment. The evolution of the “series of texts”, then in the bleak “closed space” phase, suggested that the author had reached the end of his imaginative and

narrative tether. In the so-called “closed space texts” Beckett deals with what could be called “tableaux vivants” which are scrutinised from several particular angles. As the theatrical word suggests these observations are always from the outside. The observer, however, is not a mere passive bystander, since he is also able to direct actions within the closed space. Brater, discussing *All Strange Away*, describes this text as “demonstrative, not revelatory, a text that comes to life as performative speech in the theatricality of the moment in which it gets itself said.”¹⁵ This characterization, however, can also be applied to the other “closed space texts”. In *Texts for Nothing* the unnamed narrators wondered: “What am I doing, talking, having my figments talk, it can only be me.” (p. 83), whereas in the “closed space” texts the figments have become totally speechless. Especially the minimalistic “Ping” (published 1967) and “Lessness” (published in 1970) indicated that the author was experimenting verbally and stylistically to a point where the next step could indeed amount to that ultimate white painting that Van der Starre, perhaps ironically, suggested.¹⁶

At this point in Beckett’s writing career critics were keenly aware of Beckett’s verbal quest for nothingness, the state in which the intellect would be annihilated. In several prose texts the author had expressed his frustration with regard to his linguistic tools and his longing for the words to stop. Yet, there was also this urge to continue the artistic chore. “On” as Beckett himself was to put it prominently in several publications. The phrase “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” from the end of *The Unnamable* must surely be in the top ten of most frequently quoted and misquoted phrases in Beckett criticism. Van der Starre intuitively sensed that Beckett’s writing was to lead to a text which would be at the extreme limits of what was still linguistically articulatable, a text after which nothing more could be said. In short, a text which could have had the title “Nohow On”, and would consist of the silence of wordless blanks.

Starting with the Trilogy, Beckett proceeds to try and find his artistic position between the noisy world of words and stories in the here and now and the silent world of self which is beyond expression. The way between the two worlds is outlined in the libretto *neither* where the Schopenhauerian word “heedless” is the keyword to the solution. The phenomenal world is forbidden territory in the framework of the artistic purpose and the world of self is beyond all possible verbal modes of expression. Neither direction should be scrutinised. Only when the

writer achieves severance from the will is there a chance that the unspeakable home of nothingness can be arrived at. This involves making the intellect release its hold over the mind and the words that constitute its activity. As Schopenhauer says, there are moments when we are freed from our wordly selves,

moments in which, released from the sullen pressure of will [and intellect], we seem to rise out of the earth's heavy atmosphere, are the most blissful we know. From this we can understand how blessed must be the life of a person whose will is assuaged not merely for moments, as in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but for ever; indeed, it is utterly extinguished but for the last glimmering spark that maintains the body, and will be extinguished with it. Such a person, who, after many bitter struggles with his own nature, has finally conquered outright, remains only as a pure, knowing being, the undimmed mirror of the world. Nothing more can trouble him, nothing can move him, for he has cut all the thousand cords of will which keep us bound to the world, and which, as desire, fear, envy, anger, tear and pull us hither and thither, inflicting constant pain.¹⁷

Cutting these “thousand cords of will” is what the narrator longs for: “Vain longing that vain longing go” (72). And indeed it is what he achieves at the end of *Worstward Ho*.¹⁸ The words “softening soft” (68) and later “ooze” (70), referring to the narrator’s mind and its activities, indicate that his intellect is indeed relaxing its conscious attention. With these worsened words he must have achieved willlessness, and he comes closer to the final revelation, just before the extinction of intellect, when “nohow on”, than any previous narrator in Beckett’s *oeuvre*.¹⁹

In the light of this explanation the reader must assume that a sudden leap of the imagination must have occurred in the blank between paragraphs 94 and 95. In order for the final revelation to take place, the remains of his softened intellect must have been fully subdued. In the penultimate paragraph, the narrator must have had enough left of his mind, however little that may amount to, to realise that the experience is about to happen, but to put the experience itself into words is impossible:

If ... it should be absolutely insisted upon that in some way or other a positive knowledge should be gained of what philosophy can express only negatively as

the denial of the will, we could only refer to that state experienced by all those who have attained to complete denial of the will, and which has been variously denoted by the names “ecstasy”, “rapture”, “illumination”, “union with God”, and so forth. But this state cannot properly be called knowledge, because it has no longer the form of subject and object, and is, moreover, accessible only to one’s own experience and cannot be communicated at second hand. (*World as Will and Idea*, IV par. 71, pp. 260–61)

All of Beckett’s work moves towards one goal: to reach the Schopenhauerian state of denial of the will, in which the object–subject dichotomy that dogs human existence is finally resolved:

... [W]ith the free denial, the surrender of the will, all th[e]se phenomena are also suspended[: t]hat constant strain and stress without purpose and without rest, at all the grades of objectivity, that strain and stress in which and through which the world consists; the variety of forms succeeding one another in gradation; the whole manifestation of the will; and, finally, also the universal forms of this manifestation, time and space, and also its fundamental form, subject and object—all are suspended. No will: no idea, no world.

Before us, certainly, remains only nothingness. ... [T]o those in whom the will has turned about and has denied itself, this world of ours, real as it is, with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing. (*Ibid.*, pp. 261–62)²⁰

This is the moment when the ceaseless come and go between self and unself ends. Language, as the product of the intellect, inherited from the unself, is both an obstruction which needs to be removed to this end, and the only instrument with which to do the removing. It may be said to have been Beckett’s larger aim in his *oeuvre* to tame language to the worst possible, or least, expression: to make them approach the nothingness of silence. Since words can never shed their referentiality completely, this is a vain pursuit until such time as the words can be made to cease altogether. Beckett’s last piece of writing, “What Is the Word”, summarises this dilemma and can be seen as another expression of *neither* with the difference that in the text of “What Is the Word” the mechanics of the writer’s tools, repetition and musicality, are made visible. The message of “What Is the Word” may be

interpreted as follows: seeing all this here (the world) it is sheer foolishness to go on with the urge to take what appears to be a glimpse of the faint and far unnamable over there (the self). “What” is the keyword here, the aspiring “killer” word, but it remains unanswered in the text except by its own echo: “what”. Nevertheless, it might be said that the question is identical with the answer: the subject and the object are one and the same. Further expression is futile.

It is clear that the basis for Beckett’s lifelong artistic quest for a condition of stasis between the self and the unself is Schopenhauerian. According to Schopenhauer, in “On the Vanity of Existence”, devoting one’s attention to the “this here” as Beckett calls it in “What Is the Word”, and calling this wisdom, is the greatest folly:

Every moment of our life belongs to the present only for a moment; then it belongs for ever to the past. Every evening we are poorer by a day. We would perhaps grow frantic at the sight of this ebbing away of our short span of time were we not secretly conscious in the profoundest depths of our being that we share in the inexhaustible well of eternity, out of which we can for ever draw new life and renewed time.

You could, to be sure, base on considerations of this kind a theory that the greatest *wisdom* consists in enjoying the present and making this enjoyment the goal of life, because the present is all that is real and everything else merely imaginary. But you could just as well call this mode of life the greatest *folly*: for that which in a moment ceases to exist, which vanishes as completely as a dream, cannot be worth any serious effort. (*Essays*, p. 52)

Beckett would agree with calling the obsession with the fleeting moments folly, but he adds that the urge to perceive the beyond is folly too.

In retrospect it is possible to see that the thematic thread of this artistic quest in Beckett’s work runs from the “revelation” in 1946 through *The Unnamable*, the *Texts for Nothing*, some of the “closed space texts” and *neither to Worstward Ho*. Two categories may be distinguished in the post-war prose: narrative fictions (the texts of the unself) on the one hand, and prose experiments (the texts of the self) on the other. The chief aim of both categories of text is to establish unity with the other: the need for self and unself to merge. Frequently the two threads mingle,

but they can usually be told apart; in *Company*, for example, though combined in the same text, they are completely separate strands. The experimental fictions at first attempt to achieve the undoing of the barrier between self and unself by finding a “killer word”, as the phrase from *Texts for Nothing* has it. However, a killer word can *ipso facto* never be the solution, for language, even if it consists of only one word, is itself the barrier. It is not until the end of *Worstward Ho* that unity is achieved, when the hole in the skull provides an open passage, outletting and inletting all. At this point the world empties into the self and the self empties into the world: both become one. In the absence of a language for being, Beckett takes the road towards silence. Once the barrier of language has dissolved and intellect is at its “meremost minimum” self and unself can finally become one. *Worstward Ho* can be seen as Beckett’s killer text, in which language itself finally comes to a full stop.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

¹ *Conversations*, pp. 150–51. Beckett’s “own words” that Juliet quotes were reported by Gabriel d’Aubarède in *Nouvelles littéraires*: “Molloy and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things that I feel” (no 1746, 16 February 1961, p. 7). See also *Conversations*, pp. 20–23 and 139–41; Cronin, pp. 358–61; Knowlson, 351–53.

² *Proust*, p. 19.

³ *Three Dialogues*, in *Proust*, p. 112.

⁴ *Three Dialogues*, in *Proust*, p. 103.

⁵ *Three Dialogues*, in *Proust*, p. 123.

⁶ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, London, 1978, p. 346.

⁷ [1933; English translation 1958], New York, 1962.

⁸ In 1977 Beckett told Charles Juliet in conversation: “You have to work in an area where there are no possible pronouns, or solutions, or reactions, or standpoints ... That’s what makes it so diabolically difficult” (*Conversations*, p. 165).

⁹ Schopenhauer’s influence on Beckett’s world view has been discussed by a number of critics, especially in the sixties and seventies (see, for example, Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*). More recently, Rupert Wood has examined the Schopenhauerian presence in *Proust* and the later fiction; see “An Endgame of Aesthetics: Beckett as Essayist”, in *CC*, pp. 1–16.

¹⁰ “Sottisier”, RUL MS 2901, p. 25.

¹¹ Harvey, “Beckett on Life and Art”, in *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic*, pp. 247–50; at 249.

¹² From *Frescoes of the Skull*, London, 1979, p. 43.

¹³ E. van der Starre, “Het einde van het verhaal”, in *Tijd en werkelijkheid in de moderne literatuur*, Wassenaar, 1974 (our translation).

¹⁴ Interview with John Calder, Paris, July 1997.

¹⁵ Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text*, p. 84.

¹⁶ Cf the etchings made by the American artist Robert Ryman as illustrations for the Limited Editions Club edition of *Nohow On*: white textured ink on white paper, which are supposed to have made Beckett exclaim, “I can’t see anything. They’re perfect” (Gerry Dukes, lecture, Leiden University, March, 1995).

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Everyman, 1995, Book Four: par. 68, pp. 245–46.

¹⁸ Cf also *Watt*: “the longing for longing gone” (p. 201); and “the need never to need” (p. 202).

¹⁹ In his PhD thesis Andrew Renton calls it Beckett’s “aspiring towards the exclusion of the self from the text”. Martin Esslin suspects a similar objective: “For Beckett’s characters, that quest, the ultimate quest, is the quest for their own self or rather the pursuit of the unity of that self” (“Samuel Beckett—Infinity, Eternity”, in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. Enoch Brater, OUP, 1986, p. 121).

²⁰ The same passages are also quoted by John Pilling in *Samuel Beckett*, p. 127.

REVERBERATIONS

Worstward Ho has so far been treated, first as a text without a context, and then as a text with a context not stretching beyond that of Beckett's own *oeuvre*. It has been argued in the previous chapters that the text of *Worstward Ho* is to a large extent self-referential and suppresses occasion as much as possible. Of all Beckett's texts *Worstward Ho* might be said to come closest to being "the thing itself" rather than referring to an (imaginary) world outside itself. In *Worstward Ho* more than in *Work in Progress*, "form is content, content is form" as Beckett said about Joyce's "Work in Progress" in 1929 ("Dante ...", p. 27). In contrast with *Company*, for instance, the narrator of *Worstward Ho* does not refer to memories or activities taking place in the real world. The entire text presents itself as an autonomous work of art, a self-centred verbal icon, and seems to reject any interpretation other than in terms of itself. The mere fact that there is no identifiable narrator, for instance, and the lack of pronouns and specific time and place indicators all suggest that the whole narration takes place outside the known world of living things.

Autonomous though it may appear, the language of *Worstward Ho* nevertheless yields sufficient clues to familiar phenomena to allow the reader to enter into communication with it (as the present book exemplifies). *Worstward Ho* also remains firmly connected with Beckett's larger *oeuvre*. There are many echoes of earlier works, some of them even going back to his earliest works such as *Murphy* and *Watt*. But quarrying the intratextual layers does not exhaust the text's riches. Persistent, if at times faint, echoes from beyond the confines of the *oeuvre* keep making themselves heard. The present chapter suggests some possible sources for them. No attempt will be made to present coherent interpretations spanning the entire text of *Worstward Ho* on the basis of these intertextual echoes. Indeed, it is unlikely that this dense text would allow such an overall interpretation and certain that it would not be helpful to an understanding of it. In contrast to authors like James Joyce, Beckett was not particularly given to playing the game of "trace the reference" and his writing method, though mainly rational, was guided by sub-conscious motives rather than the spirit of rational architecture. In reply to a letter

from James Knowlson, asking Beckett for help in interpreting his work, Beckett wrote:

I simply know next to nothing about my work in this way, as little as a plumber of the history of hydraulics. There is nothing/nobody with me when I'm writing, only the hellish job in hand. The "eye of the mind" in *Happy Days* does not *refer* to Yeats any more than the "revels" in *Endgame* (refer) to *The Tempest*. They are just bits of pipe I happen to have with me. I suppose all is reminiscence from womb to tomb. All I can say is I have scant information concerning mine—alas.¹

The product of his associative method, the work's texture, is riddled with references that are not part of Beckett's conscious design. The following discussion will therefore confine itself to associative parallels with other widely known texts, suggested by certain textual and thematic echoes for which there would appear to be sufficient textual evidence.

TITLE

Chapter 1 presented a number of readings of *Worstward Ho*'s title, which included hearing in it a reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The evidence of Beckett's notebook, kept in Reading University Library as MS 2901, showed this to be a "bit of pipe" very deliberately applied to *Worstward Ho*'s plumbing. However, there are many more echoes to be heard in the title, which may to some extent fall into the category of reminiscences gathered on the road "from womb to tomb". That some of these echoes will be heard to reverberate in the body of the text may indicate that they have not been entirely randomly selected.

The most obvious literary allusion suggested by the title is the one to Charles Kingsley's novel set in Elizabethan times, *Westward Ho!* (1855). This book, with its patriotic tales of English bravery in the face of Spanish treachery, was widely read by Victorian children. The novel was so popular in its day that a seaside resort in the west of England was named after it. By the time of Beckett's own youth the novel was still popular enough for Beckett to have been familiar with it. "Westward ho!" may have gained currency since Kingsley used it for his title, but as Enoch Brater and others have observed, the phrase has a history that goes back to

Shakespeare's time. Viola, for instance, in *Twelfth Night* exclaims "westward-ho".² "Westward ho" was even used as a title for a Jacobite comedy by John Webster and Thomas Dekker (*Westward Hoe*, written in 1604; printed in 1607).³ In this play "westward ho" is the cry of the stagecoach driver touting for potential passengers. Enoch Brater suggests that *Worstward Ho*'s title

not only makes capital of the darkening leitmotif of riding westward, made famous by another seventeenth-century writer, John Donne

but in echoing the title of Webster and Dekker's play,

further prepares us for this work's skillful incorporation of the kind of poetic energy T.S. Eliot so much admired in the dramatic language of the Tudor and Stuart playwrights. The "pox", "ooze", and "gnawing", of *Worstward Ho*, as well as its archaic "twain" and "vast atween", are a high modernist attempt to reinvent a forgotten but still muscular Jacobean theater vocabulary. (Brater, *ibid.* pp. 137–38)

For all the appeal of having all three syllables of Beckett's title chime in *Westward Hoe*, rather than just two in Donne's "Good Friday 1613: Riding Westward", it is probably the fainter echo of the latter that is more to Beckett's point. In Donne's meditation, the antithesis between east and west is naturally carried over into that between birth and death: "There [in the east] I should see a Sunne, by rising set". Donne's identification of the West with death fits neatly with one of his favourite conceits, of the globe as a map whose ends meet:

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currants yeeld returne to none,
What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flatt maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.⁴

This identification of west with death goes back to the biblical Book of Genesis, where Adam after his creation was placed in the garden "eastward in Eden" (Gen.

2:8). After eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve are driven away from the garden and from then on this place is forbidden territory, guarded by “Cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24). In other words: Adam and Eve were told by God to go from where things were good to where things are bad: to the world of death.⁵

“To step west” is still a commonly used expression for dying in Ireland,⁶ and the association of the west with death suggests a number of further literary references. The west symbolizing death provides the central theme for James Joyce’s story “The Dead”, for example, but it occurs in several other Irish texts, notably those of W.B. Yeats.

In Beckett’s own *oeuvre*, as both Pilling and Brater have noticed, the title also puts the reader in mind of the end of the story “What a Misfortune” in *More Pricks Than Kicks*. The story relates the courtship and marriage of convenience of Belacqua and Thelma bboggs, who is “so definitely not beautiful that once she was seen she was with difficulty forgotten, which is more than can be said for, say, the Venus Callipyge. Her trouble was to get herself seen in the first instance” (p. 107). After the worst possible marriage ceremony and subsequent “festivities”, they are off on their honeymoon, “touring Connemara”. When Thelma asks Belacqua for the tassel of purple veronica he wore in his lapel during the ceremony, a significant souvenir of the “happy day”, which she had already made up her mind to “lock up in the furthest recesses of a casket”, where “[t]ime might pulverise these mementoes”,

He clapped his hand to the place. Alas! The tassel had drooped, wormed its stem out of the slit, fallen to the ground and been trodden underfoot.

“Gone west” he said.

They went further. (p. 134)

The sinister fate of the veronica augurs the worst for their loveless marriage, as they set out to follow the fate of Belacqua’s tassel by going off to Connemara, in the West of Ireland. Or might the concluding sentence suggest that theirs was a fate worse than death, further than “gone west”?

But one should perhaps not strain oneself too far listening for overtones of death only. “Worstward ho” can be read not only as a homophone (“worst word”),

but also as a homograph (“worst ward ho”). In this light the phrase can be literally interpreted as the direction of the worst possible ward or as the ward in which the worst is contained. On a metaphorical level this “ward” could be viewed as the skull embodying the intellect, seat and germ of man’s profound human suffering:

[C]ould anything be better, in this world or the next? The mind, dim and hushed like a sick-room, like a chapelle ardente, thronged with shades; *the mind at last its own asylum*, disinterested, indifferent, its miserable, erethisms and discriminations and futile sallies suppressed; the mind suddenly reprieved, ceasing to be an annex of the restless body, the glare of understanding switched off.⁷

Beckett was fascinated by wards in a literal sense, too, as his novels amply testify; wards feature prominently in, for example, *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*. Outside Beckett’s own work a more literary allusion in “worst ward ho” may perhaps be recognised to Chekhov’s famous “Ward 6” (1892), the story of a man’s mental downfall. Dr Ragin, a village doctor in search of stimulating intellectual company, becomes obsessed with the academically educated Gromov, an “insane” patient in the dilapidated Ward 6. Their communication ends abruptly when the embittered Gromov accuses the doctor of having no idea of reality: “... you’ve never suffered. You’ve only fed on the sufferings of others, like a leech. Whereas I have suffered uninterruptedly, from the day I was born.”⁸ After having lost contact with the only person he felt he could talk to intelligently and having suffered several financial setbacks, caused by his “friend” the local postmaster, the doctor drifts into a self-imposed social isolation, and his mental health begins to slide.

To stifle his petty feelings, he made haste to reflect that Khobotov, the postmaster, and he himself would sooner or later perish without leaving as much as a trace of their existence behind them. If one were to imagine some spirit flying through space past the earth a million years hence, he would see nothing but clay and bare rocks. Everything—civilization and moral law—would have perished and not even be buried under burdock. (*Ibid.*, p. 176)

Because the doctor is deemed to be ill by his “friends” and, moreover, is now bankrupt, he is sent to the worst ward of the hospital—the very place where he

used to see Gromov when he still worked there. Through his last contact with Gromov, who is still there, the doctor who was so fond of “philosophizing” in his sane life learns on the last day of his life that—now that he has felt “the rough touch of life” (p. 183)—reasoning offers no comfort to his hellish predicament. On his deathbed, yearning to be delivered of suffering, he is terrified that immortality might exist. His final vision, which starts off as a happy idyll but ends in a terrible nightmare, can be seen as a metaphor for the worsening course his life has taken.

There may be no direct allusions in *Worstward Ho* to this masterpiece of storytelling; nevertheless, there are too many echoes for the allusion to be ignored altogether. The fear that death might not bring the longed for release from the terror of the mind is a particularly pertinent example. *Worstward Ho* gives voice to the same desire for the words to cease expressed in so much of Beckett’s *oeuvre*: “Words gone when nohow on.” Beckett’s characters do not on the whole appear to dread the apprehension of annihilation: if anything they are moved by an *amor vacui* rather than a *horror vacui*. What horror they might feel is reserved for the idea that the words might *not* cease at the moment of death, and that death does not mean an end of consciousness,⁹ for as long as the words keep coming consciousness continues:

Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere. (*The Unnamable*, p. 88)

Beckett’s final prose text, *Stirrings Still*, ends with the longing phrase: “Oh all to end”:

No matter how no matter where. Time and grief and self so-called. Oh all to end. (*As the Story Was Told*, p. 128)

WORSTWARD HO AT LARGE

Though the text does not readily invite a wider reference, most readers of Beckett will bring their sophisticated apparatus for detecting intertextual reference not only to the title, but to the body of the text as well. It is hard to avoid hearing in

Worstward Ho verbal as well as thematic echoes from major literary, religious and philosophical texts, such as Plato, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the Bible, Saint Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Descartes, Goethe, Jung—to name only some prominent ones that readily come to mind. There are, for example, remarkable parallels between the account of God's creation and his attempts to control it and the inverse actions of *Worstward Ho*'s narrator. Again, if the book is regarded primarily as an account of the narrator's spiritual quest, it is not dissimilar to Saint Augustine's account in his *Confessiones* of the way he seeks to transform a belief in God he already holds intellectually into real faith.

I tried again and came a little nearer to my goal, and then a little nearer still, so that I could almost reach out and grasp it. But I did not reach it. I could not reach out to it or grasp it, because I held back from the step by which I should die to death and become alive to life. (Book VIII, Chapter 11)

Sheer force of will, controlled by reason, cannot achieve the task; Saint Augustine finds that his mind refuses to obey its own command:

The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted. (Book VIII, Chapter 9)

As in the case of *Worstward Ho*, it ultimately takes a revelation to resolve Saint Augustine's impasse, which is caused by the inadequacy of the rational mind. This inadequacy of the rational mind, in *Worstward Ho* represented by its chief tool, language, is in both cases caused by the weight of wordly baggage that attaches to it:

Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world. The weight I carried was the habit of the flesh. (Book VII, Chapter 17)

An examination of the loudest echoes reveals two areas of concern in *Worstward Ho* in particular: investigation of the nature of the mind (self, consciousness) and preparation for death.

In *Worstward Ho* the narrator's single aim is the dismantling of his own mental universe. Though dismantling may be the reverse of God's handiwork in the Old Testament, the narrator's is in many ways His omnipotent equivalent. They share, for example, a continuing sense of frustration at the disappointing results of their labour. And in both cases their work is driven by the power of language. St. John's famous opening phrase "In the beginning was the Word", which refers to the state before creation, can also be applied to the basis of existence of *Worstward Ho*. Both works have in common that they move inexorably to the state when both the words and the insubstantial bodies will have gone. Even though there is no evidence in *Worstward Ho* that the narrator acknowledges a higher being (if we except the "unknown source of the words") there are several conceptual, and even verbal, echoes from the Bible to be found in Beckett's text, viz. *soul*, *hell*, *preying* and *gnawing*. *Worstward Ho* is a text which appears to develop autonomously, yet a protestant education has left its unmistakable imprint on it, given the evidence of the echoing vocabulary and the themes of a large corpus of Christian writings.¹⁰

The detailed description *Worstward Ho* offers of the process of emptying the mind presupposes and/or embodies an hypothesis—implicit if not explicit—on the nature and workings of the human mind. The mind is a mysterious instrument. Since Freud we have the unconscious to name that part of the human mind which escapes our control. The apparent bipartite division of the narrator's mind in *Worstward Ho* and the unknowable source of the words call to mind the concept of a self as proposed by C.G. Jung in his psycho-analytical writings. Moreover, the mind's force is that of a two-faced sword: it is capable of being activated by will-power, but as often as not it seems to be activated by a force outside our self. It is this Janus-like quality of the mind that has never ceased to baffle thinkers.

But how do I know that there is not something different altogether ... of which it is impossible to entertain the slightest doubt? Is there not a God, or some being, by whatever name I may designate him, who causes these thoughts to arise in my mind? But why suppose such a being, for it may be I myself am capable of producing them?¹¹

However spiritual his philosophy, Plato has no doubt that the latter is indeed the case. Yet Plato, too, recognises the essentially divided nature of the mind or (soul).

Reason is the highest faculty, capable of apprehending the world of the forms and aspiring to a vision of the form, or idea, of the True, (which is identical with the Good). It is, in the *Phaedrus*' terms, the charioteer in charge of a team of very ill suited horses. One is the noble horse of the spirit: the higher human sentiments. Its companion in the yoke is the lowly horse of the animal appetite, constantly in need of guidance and correction.

Though the terms are different, and there is not necessarily a neat correspondence between them, the divided nature of the mind/soul is a recurrent feature of western philosophical and religious thought. What is in particular at stake is the hierarchical relation between our mind on the one hand and the physical and metaphysical world around us on the other. The references in *Worstward Ho* to Plato and Shakespeare deal with the reality of the things of the world versus the things of the mind.

Worstward Ho can also be read as a spiritual exercise in preparation of the soul's departure from the physical world of the body. That the soul is immortal is perhaps a religious universal. In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates convince his friends that the soul is deathless and imperishable. But there is much less agreement about what happens to the mind after death. The answer to the question will depend largely on the definition of what mind is. As the thinking *substance* it would not seem in our contemporary estimation to have a high claim on deathlessness. However, thought has found its firm physical base in the mind only recently. For Plato, mind is identical with soul, because his entire way of thinking is rather mystical. In his *Summa*, Aquinas states unequivocally that "there is no way in which minds can decompose".¹² In his *Meditations on the First Philosophy* Descartes, whom Beckett studied at length, is also quite clear that the mind—seat of reason and thought, which set man apart from animals—is "in its own nature immortal".¹³ But then, Aquinas took the mind's immortality as proof of God's existence for granted and Descartes regarded the human mind as similar in kind to but less perfect and less powerful than the mind of God and his angels.

Beckett obviously speculated on—and feared—the possibility that the mind would not die with the body, a possibility he writes about in so many of his works: *Eh Joe*; *How It Is*; *The Unnamable*; *The Calmative*; *Texts for Nothing*; *A Piece of Monologue*; *Play*, etc. However this may be, the preparation for death by the narrator of *Worstward Ho* involves the mind (in the words of the text, the "remains of

mind”). The preparation consists in emptying the mind of all thought. The immortality of the soul is a nightmare from which Beckett is trying to awake.

DECREATION OF THE MICROCOSMOS

The origin of the words that befall *Worstward Ho*’s narrator in his timeless and placeless situation cannot be established:

Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so. (35)

The narrator is unable to attribute them to anyone or anything. The words may very well be his own, descending involuntarily into his mind. However this may be, narrator and purveyor of words remain shrouded in anonymity. This anonymity is shared with the namelessness of the God of the Scripture, who can only be referred to by an oblique epithet:

And Moses said unto God, Behold *when* I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What *is* his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. (Ex. 3:13–14)

It was suggested in Chapter 1, “Argument”, that the use of the two central verbs “say” and “see” in *Worstward Ho* is reminiscent of their biblical use in the book of Genesis, where the creation is *said* into being, after which the created result is *seen*:

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: *he made* the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, And

to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that *it was good*. (Gen. 1:14–18)

God's creation, the world as we know it, is characterised by a greater light in daytime and a lesser light at night. In *Worstward Ho*'s world there is no such division, since its empty universe ("the void") is dominated by a lesser light alone: the dim light, source unknown. The difference between the two universes is that God's world during the creation is expanding whereas the world of *Worstward Ho* is contracting.

In both Genesis and *Worstward Ho* the initial object of attention is a body. In Genesis the body is being created from dust, which is described as follows:

And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness ... So God created man in his *own* image. (Gen. 1:26–27)

The inverse equivalent of God's creation as it occurs in *Worstward Ho* begins thus:

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. (3)

From this state of affairs the narrative begins and, taking its cue from the biblical "In the beginning was the Word ... And the Word was made flesh", it moves inexorably to the state when both the words and the insubstantial bodies will have gone. According to the narrator, his is the same old story of trial and error but, since he must—like all Beckettian narrators—continue, he has to try again. The Bible shows that God's creation and subsequent human history is also a process of trial and error. From the Fall of Man on, the Old Testament progresses from bad to worse. In this connection the title *Worstward Ho* may be read as a variant of "westward ho": God's exhortation to Adam and Eve to travel away from the place where everything was good, East of Eden, to the worst place, the world of death. Had the two earliest humans not eaten the fruit from the Tree of Wisdom, the Fall would not have occurred and the tragedy of human history recorded in the Bible would not have taken place. Eve, "bone of Adam's bones", not only tempts her

husband to eat the forbidden fruit, she also gives life to a man who commits the world's first murder. Soon after man has multiplied, the earth is filled with violence and God regrets having created what was conceived as a paradise but has turned into a hell.

And God saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. (Gen. 6:5–6)

Some corrective action was now felt by God to be necessary, and so he decided to destroy all human flesh by means of a flood: the first holocaust. By sparing Noah and his family God hoped to improve his creation, but, as the rest of the Bible bears out, this was a vain hope, and God was witness to further tragic developments ensuing from his flawed creation. The ultimate measure to save the world was implemented by the teachings and the eventual sacrifice of his one and only son, Jesus, but this also proved to be without ameliorative effects on the majority of mankind. The last book of the New Testament predicts an ending that will provide salvation for a small number of people in a new world. The new Jerusalem is prophesied in Revelation as the heavenly state. There is of course no guarantee, however, that this second paradise will be flawless. In summary, the Bible may be read as the chronicle of the Great Artificer's creation as well as of its sorry effects.

Where a human being is the crown of God's creativity—and simultaneously of man's downfall—Beckett's narrator makes the human body the starting point of his quest for mental obliteration. *Worstward* *Ho's* narrator experiences a similar powerlessness in his attempts to control his own thoughts in his process of "decreation". He starts with a body, without a mind. From the first he adds a place, which throws him into a quandary as to which of the two he should begin describing. When he states that the body stands, his mind refuses to accept this fact for what it is and forces him to reason logically through all steps of the process of standing up. He finds that there must be a reason for the getting up, which he surmises to be pain, which in its turn necessitates the presence of a (remains of) mind:

It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand. Somehow up. Somehow stand. Remains of mind where none for the sake of pain. (6.1-19)

The source of the narrator's quandary is the linguistic basis of thought. Language requires reason, hence the cause-and-effect nature of his thinking. To a mind that is based on reasoning, things cannot be simply accepted as they are. God's creation is similarly based in language ("And God said..."), and similarly had to proceed logically step by step: from chaos via material phenomena, landscapes and living organisms to the first humans. Moreover, language is identical with the creator:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1:1-5)

Thus it was language which was somehow transformed ("made") into things. The Greek for "word", "logos", also means "reason". So by means of what in *Company* is called a "reason-ridden" imagination (*Company*, p. 45) the world was created and enlivened by God, "the seat and germ of all" for "without him was not any thing made that was made". In other words, the basis of both the scripture and Beckett's *Worstward Ho* is language, metonymically called "the word".

In the beginning of Beckett's *Worstward Ho* "saying" appears to have the force of "creating". The anonymous narrator in *Worstward Ho* creates a mental universe which is much less comprehensive than the one created by God in the Old Testament. For someone familiar with Beckett's themes in previous texts, this is hardly surprising. For Beckett and his characters are not so much interested in creating life as they are in breaking it down and ending it all. Ending it all, however, appears to be impossible as long as there is language, reason and a speaking voice.

Although, excepting the possible source of the words, there is no reference to a higher authority in *Worstward Ho*, and the narrator expresses no longing for the next world, the text suggests in at least two places that Christian teachings drift up from his subconscious. When in 36 the narrator decides to use numbers to refer to the shades in order “to gain time” and so hasten the end, this brings back to him faint memories of the significance of time in his past life, which needs to be gained in order to repent, only to be lost again on death, when there shall be no more time:

Gain time to lose. As the soul once. The world once. (36.11–13)

Christian teaching may also be heard to reverberate when the narrator, disappointed that the words he receives are still far from inane, encourages himself:

Say the night is young alas and take heart. Or better worse say still a watch of night alas to come. A rest of last watch to come and take heart. (38.5–7)

Here the text, reading almost like an aside, is not in consonance with the tone of the narrative as a whole, especially taking into account that the context has the narrator complaining about the words being still too meaningful. By saying these phrases the narrator implements his earlier intention to speed up time in order to hasten the end more drastically. The references to night and watch are surprising since there is no earlier reference to the normal reckoning of time. If anything, the text so far has made it clear that it takes place outside everyday dimensions. Regarding this fragment as an echo from what every church-going protestant hears from the pulpit adds a dimension to the words which links up with the Bible and notably with the book of Revelation.

Revelation describes the conclusion God, now united with his son, has in store for the products of his creation and what he intends to offer the righteous in the next world. About this momentous ending (and new beginning) Christ—Alpha and Omega, the first and the last—gives John a few messages to deliver to several churches. The message to the church in Sardis reads as follows:

I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I

have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. ... He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. (Rev. 3:1–5; cf Rev. 16:15)

The verbal echoes are striking: “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” In other words, the narrator’s wish for time to go faster triggers a memory of his earlier life in which he must have been urged to repent before it was too late. The need to be watchful because Christ could come as a thief was and still is being preached fervently in protestant churches. For instance, *The Book of Common Prayer* prescribes a sermon for the minister to preach in which the message is brought home:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God: he shall pour down rain upon the sinners, snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest; this shall be their portion to drink. For lo, the Lord is come out of his place to visit the wickedness of such as dwell upon the earth. But who may abide the day of his coming? Who shall be able to endure when he appeareth? His fan is in his hand, and he will purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. The day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night: and when men shall say, Peace, and all things are safe, then shall sudden destruction come upon them, as sorrow cometh upon a woman travailing with child, and they shall not escape. (A Commination, minister’s sermon)

In the narrator’s own godless way of preparing for the end of his thoughts, and thus the end of his being, old fears caused by a Christian background seem to interfere. With or without God, the end of the narrator’s struggles is nigh: the words suggest that in the remaining hours of his watch he should try and bring the words and images to their least possible state.

Another verbal echo from the Bible that can be found in *Worstward Ho* is the word *hell*. In 88 the skull with its remains of mind is referred to as hell, the source of the images and the words:

One dim black hole mid-foreskull. Into the hell of all. Out from the hell of all. (88)

If the mind is hell, the entire narrative takes place in hell. The concept of Hell as described in the later books of the Bible is a place of punishment where sinners who are beyond repentance are sent after death. Contrary to popular belief, Hell is not eternal. As John observes in his vision in Revelation, Hell—and all souls in it—are destroyed on the day of judgement before the creation of the new Jerusalem:

... [D]eath and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:13–15)

In *Worstward Ho*'s hell the narrator waits eagerly for the moment everything comes to a halt, which may parallel the second death of the Scripture. This personal hell, however, differs from the Hell as described in Revelation in that there is no perception of souls other than the narrator. But like *Worstward Ho*'s hell, Revelation's is dark. In Revelation when the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast the result was that his kingdom, hell,

was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds. (Rev. 16:10–11)

In the purely mental universe of *Worstward Ho*, where everything is immaterial, pain does not exist. The pain that is suffered in hell does not seem to occur in *Worstward Ho* but some words still echo the memory of pain as something that “preys” and “gnaws”, which suggests that the narrator may be uncomfortable in the situation he is in:

No stilling preying. The shades. The dim. The void. All always faintly preying. Worse for naught. No less than when but bad all always faintly preying. Gnawing.

Gnawing to be gone. Less no good. Worse no good. Only one good. Gone. Gone for good. Till then gnaw on. All gnaw on. To be gone. (84–85)

Suffering is a keyword in Beckett's *oeuvre*. There is no salvation, no relief. The only relief Beckett's personas hope for is when the situation is ended and complete nothingness has been achieved. In other words, when the name is blotted out from the Book of Life. Only just before that moment there may be a sensation opposite to pain, viz. joy. In *Worstward Ho* the narrator speculates about this feeling that he will experience when the words become almost completely inane:

Remains of mind then still. Enough still. Somewhose somewhere somehow enough still. No mind and words? Even such words. So enough still. Just enough still to joy. Joy! Just enough still to joy that only they. Only! (57)

The last but one image that is described in *Worstward Ho* is the latest state of the three shades which, because they are in a kneeling-like position, resemble people who are praying. The skull, the seat of all, is there too. Then apparently the narrator/creator deems it all enough and describes how the shades and the skull are suddenly far away. In contrast to the scene in Revelation where the old earth and heaven are also seen to be moved away, *Worstward Ho*'s seat and scene of all is also thrust far away to the "bounds of boundless void". This may be the result of the fact that for the narrator there is no new world. Nothingness has finally been achieved, although we cannot be sure, since there is no one outside the narrator to tell the reader. God, sitting on his throne in the new Jerusalem after the second death, announces: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The narrator, maybe no more than an instant before the moment of his revelation, announces that "nohow on" was said, indicating that there is no way the process can be continued—not, in any case, with the words of the (old) world.

The entire argument of *Worstward Ho* looks forward to the worst, which is the moment when all is least and which is allegedly the only joyful moment in the

whole process. God may have imagined, and therefore created, a world full of living things in some part of His blissful paradise, but Beckett's narrator uses his imagination to reduce his mental world to an absolute minimum in order that the end of the hell he is in may come sooner.

The Bible teaches that the real world is not what can be observed by humans, but the world that is to come, the world that is still to be created. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes knows this all too well: "All is vanity." (Eccl. 1:2) With the narrator of *Worstward Ho* he has come to realise that "there is no new thing under the sun," and rhetorically wonders:

Is there *any* thing whereof it may be said, See this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. *There is* no remembrance of former *things*; neither shall there be *any* remembrance of *things* that are to come with *those* that shall come after. ... I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. (Eccl. 1:10–14)

The narrator of *Worstward Ho* seems to be in a similar state of mind when he wonders what is the use of continuing his intellectualisations, since history merely seems to be repeating itself:

All of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed. With care never worse failed. (7)

If the biblical echoes draw attention to the parallels between *Worstward Ho* and Christian doctrine, they also place in a sharper light the differences. The nothingness that the narrator seeks is in sharp contrast with the Christian belief in eternal life. "God shall never come to a *Non esse*, God shall never say to us, *Be nothing*, God shall never succour us with an annihilation, nor give us the ease of resolving into nothing ..." (John Donne, Sermon, 11 February 1627).¹⁴

THE NATURE AND WORKINGS OF THE MIND

Roquentin in Sartre's *La nausée* acutely suffers from his realization of the futility of human existence. But the most striking aspect of his condition is his utter defencelessness against the workings of his own mind. This despair of the serviceability of

our mind is a relatively new phenomenon in our culture. Religious belief has always assigned to the mind a special, non-physical status as the seat of reason and thought, which constituted the link between man and his God. It was naturally assumed that the mind ruled the body. In Descartes' synopsis of his *Meditations on the First Philosophy*

... Finally, all the grounds are adduced from which the existence of material objects may be inferred; not, however, because I deemed them of great utility in establishing what they prove, viz., that there is in reality a world, that men are possessed of bodies, and the like, the truth of which no one of sound mind ever seriously doubted; but because, from a close consideration of them, it is perceived that they are neither so strong nor clear as the reasonings which conduct us to the knowledge of our mind and of God; so that the latter are, of all which come under human knowledge, the most certain and manifest—a conclusion which it was my single aim in these *Meditations* to establish ... (p. 78)

From the nineteenth century increasingly scientific developments have played havoc with such views, of which we now see the results in literature. The question of the extent of man's control over the working of his mind, which has become one of the main preoccupations of scientists today, is also a major question that occupied Beckett in his work. So far, neither psychological or neuro-physical, nor philosophical approaches have solved the mystery of the human mind, especially the nature of consciousness, despite a big show of scholarly muscle. Yet, there are signs that the analytical approach is beginning to bear fruit. While it looks increasingly unlikely that the answers will be found in the realm of philosophy, where there is a growing confusion about terms like "consciousness", "mind", "soul", "thought" and "idea", neuroscientists are making some headway, though as yet mainly as a result of the sheer quantity of data becoming available:

[E]fforts to rethink th[e] classic mystery [of the nature of consciousness] are motivated by the growing body of new information from the neurosciences and the computing sciences. The more that is known about how the brain works, and how this might be similar or dissimilar to the operation of the information-processing devices we build, the closer we feel we are coming to

the Rosetta Stone for translating subjective accounts of experience into empirical accounts of physical causes and effects.¹⁵

Worstward Ho poses a number of problems and questions where its representation of the workings of the mind are concerned.¹⁶ A strong sense of logical reasoning may be detected in the narrative, yet it is doubtful to what extent the narrator is in control of his words. There are even passages that lead the reader to wonder whether *Worstward Ho*'s setting is before or after death. The phrases "Gain time to lose. As the soul once. The world once" (36), for instance, can be taken to indicate that the narrator has moved on from the phenomenal world. This observation may, incidentally, also suggest that there was a time that the narrator believed in an immortal soul.

Worstward Ho poses three general questions that are found treated recurrently in the literary, religious and philosophical canon. The first question is that as to the nature of the mind (what are its functions; how does it perform those functions; and is there a metaphysical dimension to the mind?). The second question is that of the extent to which we are able to wield the mind as an instrument in our service (how reliable is it, and how much control have we over it?). The third concerns the hierarchical relationship between mind and natural phenomena (is the mind a passive processor of the phenomena of the world, or is the world a projection of the mind?).

PLATO'S CAVE

There are a number of phenomena in *Worstward Ho* that bring to mind the famous simile of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (514–521b). The light pervading *Worstward Ho*'s void is dim, as it is in Plato's cave, and in both cases its source is unknown—to the prisoners in the cave because they cannot turn around, and to the narrator of *Worstward Ho* because he says so. Also, the title's "worstward ho" might be read as the exact contrary to the philosopher's aspiration to ascend to the Form of the good. Plato's prisoners are loath to go up to the real world, because they think that the light would hurt their eyes. Because they think the real world a worse place than the cave, they prefer to remain shackled in their dark cave. Only the philosopher knows that the light is better, because it represents the Good. In this parable worse actually *is* better: what the prisoners regard as the worst direction to follow

is in fact the philosopher's highest aim, the Good. In *Worstward Ho*, through the text's equation of best and worst, "worstward ho" also paradoxically comes to mean "in the direction of the best state". The shades that are seen by the narrator in the dim void, moreover, are reminiscent of the shadows seen by the prisoners in the cave. Strengthening the Platonic link, in ms B of *Worstward Ho* the word "shadow" is used where subsequent drafts and the printed text have "shade". The word first occurs in the ms in the phrase "all shadow", which forms a paragraph by itself. It is a comment by the narrator on the unsubstantiality of all his imaginings. That the word "shadow" is meant to describe the figments of the mind is corroborated by the phrase "Shadow theatre of it all", which occurs two paragraphs down in the ms and is a description of the head. It does not require a great leap of the imagination to link the mind as the "shadow theatre" with Plato's cave. (In an abandoned draft version of ms B27 Beckett, incidentally, uses the word "cave" where the final text has "grot": "In that void. A cavern in that void. A hole. Strong faint light in that cavern. That hole. Far & wide. High & low. // No knowing. No saying. Were there a cave<rn>. A hole. Strong faint light in that cave<rn>. That hole. // Every crack & cranny. // As never was".)

The phrase "shadow theatre" parallels Plato's comparison of the shadows that the prisoners see with a puppet show:¹⁷

Another. Again. Head sunk on crippled hands. Vertex vertical. Eyes closed.
Shadow theatre of it all. (B10)¹⁸

The echoes in *Worstward Ho* of the cave simile invite a closer look at Plato's ideas about the workings of the mind. There are passages in virtually every dialogue, but apart from the simile of the cave in the *Republic*, obvious choices are the *Phaedrus*, which contains the famous comparison of the soul (or mind) to a charioteer trying to control two horses (246–56) and the *Phaedo*, the last conversation between Socrates and his friends before his execution, which discusses the nature of the mind, both in life and in death.

An essential tenet in Plato's philosophy is no doubt that the realm of the senses is inferior to the realm of the mind. The simile of the sun (507–509), the analogy of the divided line (509–511), and the simile of the cave (514–521b) in the *Republic*, and the entire argument of the *Phaedo* all emphasise the illusoriness of the

sensory world. The philosopher's concern is with the realm of the mind, where alone truth is to be found. The instrument in the search for truth is the mind, but especially that part which Plato calls "reason". In the case of mortal beings the efficacy of reason, the soul's "charioteer", is impaired by the unruly behaviour of its two other constituents, the "horses" of spirit and appetite. The vision of truth that reason aspires to is in the mental realm of the "forms". The Forms are "ideals or patterns, which have a real existence independent of our minds and of which the many individual things called by their names in the world of appearances are like images or reflections".¹⁹

The difference in status between the world of the forms and the world of the senses is reflected by the way the mind apprehends them. The world of the senses is the object of the lower strata of the mind: "illusion" and "belief", together grouped under "opinion". The world of the Forms is the object of "mathematical reasoning" and "intelligence", together called "knowledge". There is thus a correlation between the status of the mind's activity and the status of its object:

The unchanging Forms, which are the objects of the philosopher's knowledge, are what is ultimately real. The world perceived by the senses, the world of change, though not *unreal*, has a lower status ontologically than the realm of the forms. (*The Republic*, p. 265)

The true realm of the mind is the world of the immutable Forms, and conversely, the world of Forms can only be apprehended by the rational part of the mind. The following is a crucial passage in the conversation between Socrates and Cebes from the *Phaedo*:

"... I suppose it would be agreed by everyone that God, and the Form of life itself, and any other deathless entity there may be, can never perish."

"Why yes, to be sure: agreed by every human being: and the gods, I expect, would be even more inclined to agree."

"Then inasmuch as the deathless is also indestructible, I presume that soul, if it really is deathless, must be indestructible too."

"There can be no question of that."

"So when death approaches a man his mortal part, it seems, dies, but his

immortal part gets out of the way of death and takes its departure intact and indestructible.”

“Evidently.”

“Beyond all doubt then, Cebes, soul is deathless and imperishable, and our souls will in truth exist in Hades.” (*Phaedo*, 106D–107A)

In Plato’s view (especially in the *Phaedo*) the body functions as a symbol for the imprisoned nature of the human mind. It is only “in Hades” that the soul will in fact be able to come into its own. In the cave simile it is the philosopher–ruler’s task to attempt and flee the prison temporarily, by trying to use the human intellect to ascend to the supreme vision of the good and to use the knowledge of the pure philosophy thus obtained to rule his benighted fellow-citizens in the cave. But in the *Phaedo*, the philosopher strives for release from his worldly prison for good. Unlike in the *Republic*, in the *Phaedo* Socrates has no altruistic motives for his wish as a philosopher to ascend to supreme vision; he is concerned with spiritual welfare:

indeed this and nothing else is the philosopher’s concern, the release and separation of soul from body. (67d)

This is strikingly similar to the narrator’s concern in *Worstward Ho*: he too uses his reason for the purpose of escaping from its prison—in his case his own mind. But *Worstward Ho*’s narrator attempts to flee his prison by destroying it. The reason for this is that Beckett’s narrator lacks Socrates and Plato’s faith in “the moral order of the universe”,

which demands that a good life on earth should have some reward hereafter; but [Socrates], or Plato, is to some extent influenced by the teaching of the Eleusinian mysteries, which promised bliss to the initiated, and even more by Orphic teaching, which held out a hope of the soul’s restoration to its original purity and divinity; but most of all, in this dialogue [the *Phaedo*] at least, by the Pythagorean demand for moral and intellectual purification of the soul as a substitute for ritual cleansings, initiations and observance of taboos. (*Phaedo*, ed. Hackforth, p. 42)

In the period that Beckett was writing *Worstward Ho*, Beckett wrote several drafts for a short play which was never to be finished, now to be found in Reading University Library as MS 2937. The play is about a director and an actor who are rehearsing a play which consists of a monologue pronounced by a man about to drink poison from a goblet, a situation very reminiscent of Socrates' end as described in the *Phaedo*. When the monologue is reconstructed from the larger play the words go as follows:

A (*Enters with goblet in his hand.*): I have done all man can. Save with myself away. (*Pause.*) All? No. Not all. (*Pause.*) Who can do all? Who can say he did all. No. Not all. (*Pause.*) Then what? What not? If not all what not? What not done? What if not all done not done? What? What not? What not if not what not. Last words. (*Long pause. Quaffs the goblet. Swoons to his knees, then forward on his face, lies prostrate and breathes his last. Curtain.*)²⁰

Worstward Ho, like the *Phaedo*, may be read as a preparation for death, with the crucial difference that *Worstward Ho*'s narrator is concerned to extinguish his own mind where Plato celebrates the souls' indestructability.

C.G. JUNG AND THE SELF

The notion of the birth or death of the self is a recurring one in Beckett's work. In *Stirrings Still*, for example, the narrator talks about the latter: "... patience till the one true end to time and grief and self and second self his own." The word "self" occurs in several significant places in Beckett's work; the opera libretto *neither's* concern with the relationship between the self and the "unself" or "other", and the "neither" that lies in between has already been mentioned. Beckett's frequent use of the word "self", and the emphasis in his *oeuvre* on the workings of the mind, led Lawrence Harvey to predict that "Sooner or later someone is bound to apply Freud in an attempt to get at the psychological origins of Beckett's art. The evidence is not lacking."²¹

Beckett's interest in the workings of the human psyche concentrates on the abnormal. From his earliest work, mental illnesses and mental institutions appear with notable frequency. The first occurrence of a mental institution is that of the Portrane Lunatic Asylum in "Fingal", the second story of *More Pricks than Kicks*.

The novella “The End” opens with the narrator’s departure from an asylum. But even when there is no direct textual evidence, there is a strong suggestion that most of Beckett’s major fictional characters, like Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone etc., are, should be or have been inmates of mental institutions. The psyche in a state of greater or lesser perturbation fascinates Beckett. In *Not I* “the words ... the brain ... [are] flickering away like mad”; in *Footfalls* May/Amy’s perturbed mental state is shown physically by her ceaseless pacing and emphasised by her mother’s repeated question “Will you never have done ... revolving it all? ... In your poor mind”; in *Stirrings Still* the narrator wonders whether he is “in his right mind”.

Beckett himself underwent psychoanalysis in the 1930s with the Jungian psychiatrist Dr Wilfred Bion in London in order to find a cure for his depressions, which were causing all kinds of psychosomatic diseases.²² In the same period Beckett attended at least one lecture by the psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung in the Tavistock Clinic in London. A significant case discussed by Jung in that lecture was that of a young girl who had not fully developed a self, a condition which he described as that of one who had never been born entirely. The case of this young girl,²³ which was, incidentally, to prove central to Jung’s PhD research, spoke powerfully to Beckett’s imagination. It found its way into the radioplay *All that Fall*:

Mrs Rooney: I remember once attending a lecture by one of these new mind doctors. (...) I remember his telling us the story of a little girl, very strange and unhappy in her ways, and how he treated her unsuccessfully over a period of years and was finally obliged to give up the case. He could find nothing wrong with her, he said. The only thing wrong with her as far as he could see was that she was dying. And she did in fact die, shortly after he had washed his hands of her. (...) When he had done with the little girl he stood there motionless for some time, quite two minutes I should say, looking down at his table. Then he suddenly raised his head and exclaimed, as if he had had a revelation, The trouble with her was she had never really been born! (*CSPlays*, pp. 35–36)

Beckett’s interest in Jung may not have been of a kind and intensity to form a conscious influence on his writing and, anyway, such an influence would be difficult to interpret at the best of times. A word of warning against facile Jungian interpretations of texts is offered by Jung himself:

The words composing a dream-narrative have not just *one* meaning, but many meanings. If, for instance, someone dreams of a table, we are still far from knowing what the “table” of the dreamer signifies, although the word “table” sounds unambiguous enough. For the thing we do not know is that this “table” is the very one at which his father sat when he refused the dreamer all further financial help and threw him out of the house as a good-for-nothing. The polished surface of this table stares at him as a symbol of his lamentable worthlessness in his daytime consciousness as well as in his dreams at night. This is what our dreamer understands by “table”. Therefore we need the dreamer’s help in order to limit the multiple meanings of words to those that are essential and convincing. (C.G. Jung, *Dreams*, pp. 70–71)

Worstward Ho is full of images that may, in a Jungian context, be recognised as symbols and archetypes. However, as the above quotation suggests, a Jungian analysis is impossible without authorial help to interpret them. While we can recognise these symbols and archetypes as constituents of certain larger motifs, such as individuation or a desire for wholeness, we cannot pretend to be able to interpret the symbols themselves except in the most speculative way.

On a more general level Jung’s notion of “self” and his theories on the workings of the psyche may offer a psychological answer to the question of the provenance of the words in *Worstward Ho*. However, a complicating factor in bringing Jung’s theories to bear on *Worstward Ho* is that Jung’s concept of “self” does not map well onto Beckett’s. Early in his career Jung defined the self as follows:

I have called this centre [of the personality] the *self*. Intellectually the self is no more than a psychological concept, a construct that serves to express an unknowable essence which we cannot grasp as such, since by definition it transcends our powers of comprehension.²⁴

Later Jung was to extend his definition of self so that it did not only cover the centre of the personality but “the whole range of psychic phenomena in man”:

[The self] expresses the unity of the personality as a whole. But in so far as the total personality, on account of its unconscious component, can be only in part

conscious, the concept of the self is, in part, only *potentially* empirical and is to that extent a *postulate*. In other words, it encompasses both the experienceable and the inexperienceable (or the not yet experienced). It has these qualities in common with very many scientific concepts that are more names than ideas. In so far as psychic totality, consisting of both conscious and unconscious contents, is a postulate, it is a *transcendental* concept, for it presupposes the existence of unconscious factors on empirical grounds and thus characterizes an entity that can be described only in part but, for the other part, remains at present unknowable and illimitable.²⁵

In addition to defining the self as the totality of the psyche, Jung came to regard the self as a symbol unifying the conscious and unconscious spheres of the psyche, a symbol which expresses the conjunction of opposites.²⁶ Because the self includes the unconscious, it is necessarily boundless and illimitable and not determined by space and time. In these characteristics the self as propounded by Jung strongly resembles the setting of *Worstward Ho* with its peculiar timelessness and lack of spatial dimensions. The important difference between Jung's and Beckett's use of the term "self" is that Beckett contrasts it with the "unself", or the reasoning part of the mind, while Jung includes the conscious psyche in his concept of self:

The known attitudes of the conscious mind have definable aims and purposes. But a man's attitude towards the self is the only one that has no definable aim and no visible purpose. It is easy enough to say "self," but exactly what have we said? That remains shrouded in "metaphysical" darkness. I may define "self" as the totality of the conscious and unconscious psyche, but this totality transcends our vision; it is a veritable *lapis invisibilitatis*. In so far as the unconscious exists it is not definable; its existence is a mere postulate and nothing whatever can be predicated as to its possible contents. The totality can only be experienced in its parts and then only in so far as these are contents of consciousness; but *qua* totality it necessarily transcends consciousness. Consequently the "self" is a pure borderline concept similar to Kant's *Ding an sich*. True, it is a concept that grows steadily clearer with experience—as our dreams show—without, however, losing anything of its transcendence. Since we cannot possibly know the boundaries of something unknown to us, it follows that we are not in a

position to set any bounds to the self. It would be wildly arbitrary and therefore unscientific to restrict the self to the limits of the individual psyche, quite apart from the fundamental fact that we have not the least knowledge of these limits, seeing that they also lie in the unconscious. We may be able to indicate the limits of consciousness, but the unconscious is simply the unknown psyche and for that very reason illimitable because indeterminable. Such being the case, we should not be in the least surprised if the empirical manifestations of unconscious contents bear all the marks of something illimitable, something not determined by space and time. This quality is numinous and therefore alarming, above all to a cautious mind that knows the value of precisely delimited concepts. (C.G. Jung, *Dreams*, 1974, pp. 256–57)

As in other Beckett texts, the narrator of *Worstward Ho* is the passive recipient of the words, not to say their helpless victim. It is as if the narrator's unconscious dictates the words and projects the images they suggest to the conscious self. What the words in *Worstward Ho* describe is a developing mental scene; there is no evidence that an existential reality of any kind is described in the text, and all of it, including the shades that appear in the scene, are mere mental images. If these images were based on actual memories, as such images so often are in earlier Beckett texts, family (or other) relationships between the shades would have been identified, for example as a mother, father, or the child the narrator once was. Since this is not the case, it is tempting to regard them as archetypal images, derived from the unconscious. As a trinity of male, female and child they constitute the narrator's self and its origins.

Jung's concept of individuation may also be able to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the narrator's pursuit to empty the mind of words and images. If the mind in *Worstward Ho* is regarded as the conscious part of the narrator's self, the process of "worsening" may be regarded as the reverse of the Jungian individuation process:

Individuation means becoming an "in-dividual", and insofar as "individuality" embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as "coming to selfhood" or "self-realization."²⁷

In *Worstward Ho* the conscious part of the self is being stripped of all manifestations of individuality and being reduced back to its pristine—blank—state. This process, amounting to an attempt at ultimate annihilation of the conscious mind, is impeded by the presence of words (and images) which in Beckett's *oeuvre* are the essence of continuing consciousness. Despite this hindrance *Worstward Ho* shows a development in perception from fragmented and blurred vision to an integrated vision of the whole. However, since Beckett describes the process in terms of worsening, of cutting out pieces of the fragmented whole, it appears to be the opposite of individuation: de-individuation. Instead of trying to integrate everything in the whole, Beckett cuts away as many details as possible. But whether one works towards individuation or de-individuation, in both cases the outcome is wholeness, for absolute emptiness can also be considered as wholeness.²⁸ The de-individuated state is a state in which the two opposites “whole” and “hole” coincide. In *Worstward Ho* this state is not verbally reached, since the stagnation of the mind's activities would have spelled the end of the narrator's voice. The all but empty void is the nearest to this “full emptiness” that can be described. The achievement of absolute “wholeness”, i.e. “holeness”, of the self is therefore not possible within the text.

The de-individuation process in *Worstward Ho*'s narrative development takes place in several stages. Through reasoning the narrator tries to alter and diminish the shades with the aim of eventually making them disappear. In the process the narrator becomes gradually more conscious of the quality of his perception, his way of seeing. In 47 the narrator for the first time observes that his sight is dim:

[In the void] all always to be seen. Of the nothing to be seen. Dimly seen. Nothing ever unseen. Of the nothing to be seen. Dimly seen. (47.13–18)

Throughout the text the narrator constantly remarks that his sight is dim until he realises that there are times when his sight is better:

Try better worse another stare when with words than when not. When somehow than when nohow. While all seen the same. No not all seen the same. Seen other. By the same other stare seen other. When with words than when not. When somehow than when nohow. (78.4–11)

In other words, when there are words being spoken the narrator's sight is different, and as the next paragraph shows, dimmer, than when the words are absent:

Stare by words dimmed. Shades dimmed. Void dimmed. Dim dimmed. All there as when no words. As when nohow. Only all dimmed. Till blank again. No words again. Nohow again. Then all undimmed. Stare undimmed. That words had dimmed. (79.6–18)

Moreover we learn in 80 that when the stare is clamped to one of the shades the other shades are blurred:

Shades can blur. When stare clamped to one alone. Or somehow words again. Go no nor come again. Till dim if ever go. Never to come again. (80.10–5)

The reason why this blurring occurs is discovered to be because of the possible flaw that the two black holes are still in their proper places in the unseen face (face and pupils had been worsened away as early as 45 and 53 respectively). The way to achieve less blurred vision is to reduce the two holes to one cyclopean hole:

Two black holes. Dim black. In through skull to soft. Out from soft through skull. Agape in unseen face. That the flaw? The want of flaw? Try better worse set in skull. Two black holes in foreskull. Or one. Try better still worse one. One dim black hole mid-foreskull. Into the hell of all. Out from the hell of all. So better than nothing worse say stare from now. (88.3–17)

This improvement by reduction, however, fails to allow the narrator to see without blurring and the one-eye solution apparently has not solved the problem of seeing dimly. Since the narrator is doomed to use words until language completely breaks down, there is nothing to be done about this flaw but wait patiently. In 91 the narrator is finally allowed to get a panorama view of the void with all the worsened shades seen equally clearly, *i.e.* without blurs:

Somehow again and all in stare again. All at once as once. Better worse all. The three bowed down. The stare. The whole narrow void. No blurs. All clear.

Dim clear. Black hole agape on all. Inletting all. Outletting all. (91.1–12)

In the last state the narrator is able to see the void in its entirety, with all shades far away, reduced to three pinpoints, and one pinhole for the hole in the skull. It would have been interesting to have Jung's or Bion's analysis of this rather dream-like image, which comes very close indeed to representing the (w)holeness of (de-)individuation.

Bion's main goal in analysis was to assist his patients in moving from what he called the "alpha" to the "omega" stage—the point of "Onement" or "O"—perhaps the origin of the *o* in "Godot." The process was a probing of self aimed at personal integration—rather than cure. As Bion explained, analysis was self-revelatory. "Cure or improvement," he wrote, "is both irrelevant and undesirable." "Onement" involved a journey to the ineffable, absolute reality and unity of the fragmented self. Because it was a religious or mystical experience, one's knowledge of O could barely be translated into language. As various commentators have remarked, Bion was undoubtedly influenced by his childhood years in India: his use of terms like "omniscience" and "omnipotence" at the stage of Onement suggests an affinity with the nirvana of Buddhism, the wish for "absolute unification," a sense of the "fullness of the void," (or the womb?).²⁹

In spite of the interpretative dangers mentioned earlier, it is tempting to conclude this psychoanalytical discussion by looking at one of the many Jungian symbols and archetypes that *Worstward Ho* can be quarried for. The image of the graveyard and its stooped gravestones with obliterated names and dates provides an apt symbol for the one but last state of the de-individuated self of the nameless narrator:

...a woman. Old and yet old. On unseen knees. Stooped as loving memory
some old gravestones stoop. In that old graveyard. Names gone and when to
when. Stoop mute over the graves of none. (92)

In an analysis of this image Jung might have referred to the following interpretation of the archetype of the stone:

[T]he Self is symbolised with special frequency in the form of a stone, precious or otherwise. ... In many dreams the nuclear center, the Self, also appears as a crystal. The mathematical precise arrangement of a crystal invokes in us the intuitive feeling that even in so-called “dead” matter, there is a spiritual ordering principle at work. Thus the crystal often symbolically stands for the union of extreme opposites—of matter and spirit. ... Men have collected stones since the beginning of time and have apparently assumed that certain ones were the containers of the life-force with all its mystery. The ancient Germans, for instance, believed that the spirits of the dead continued to live in their tombstones. The custom of placing stones on graves may spring partly from the symbolic idea that something eternal of the dead person remains, which can be most fittingly represented by a stone. For while the human being is as different as possible from a stone, yet man’s innermost center is in a strange and special way akin to it. ... In this sense the stone symbolises what is perhaps the simplest and deepest experience—the experience of something eternal that man can have in those moments when he feels immortal and unalterable. (C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, pp. 221–24)

The stooped stones with their obliterated inscriptions function as a perfect symbol of the de-individuated self, anticipating the end of the book when the mind is bereft of words and images.

PREPARATION FOR DEATH

Beside the inspiration Beckett may have derived from such sources as Jung, Plato, and Christian religion, *Worstward Ho* might well draw also on Buddhist writings such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. *Worstward Ho* weds the Christian and eastern traditions of preparation for death. The quest for wholeness and integrity of self is also a feature of the soul’s preparation for death as propagated by for example *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. *The Bardo Thötröl*, the original title of this important guide to enlightenment after death, is not so much a book about death as about birth, as Francesca Fremantle explains in the introduction to the translation:

... although this book is ostensibly written for the dead, it is in fact about life. The Buddha himself would not discuss what happens after death, because such

questions are not useful in the search for reality here and now. But the doctrine of reincarnation, the six kinds of existence, and the intermediate bardo state between them, refer very much to this life, whether or not they also apply after death. It is often emphasised that the purpose of reading the *Bardo Thöthröl* to a dead person is to remind him of what he has practised during his life. This “Book of the Dead” can show us how to live.³⁰

“Bardo” is like a landmark which stands between two things. It can be the period between sanity and insanity, between confusion and the confusion just about to be transformed into wisdom, and the experience between death and birth.³¹

The diction in *Worstward Ho* is often reminiscent of this ancient spiritual text. In *Worstward Ho* the reader is invited into a universe which is completely devoid of references to real life, and there is a strong suggestion that the narrator has left the real world behind. The only “objects” described in this textual framework are referred to as shades and thus immaterial. In *The Bardo Thöthröl* the soul of the deceased is guided on its journey which starts at the moment of death and can end in either enlightenment or new reincarnation. According to Francesca Fremantle in the introduction to her translation,

The fundamental teaching of this book is the recognition of one’s projections and the dissolution of the sense of self in the light of reality. (p. xvii)

The author of *The Bardo Thöthröl* and the narrator in *Worstward Ho* have in common that they both aim to have the self annihilated. Time and again the spiritual teacher of *The Bardo Thöthröl* stresses that enlightenment amounts to a dissolution of the self and can only be achieved when the deceased realises that everything is illusory. If this conviction is not achieved the soul will enter the womb-entrance to result in another conception with ensuing birth:

“... By concentrating your mind intensely and one-pointedly on this thought, that itself will close the womb-entrance, so the tantras say. O, son of noble family, do not be distracted; concentrate your mind one-pointedly.÷

“But if, even after doing this, the womb-entrance is not closed and you are about to enter a womb, then it should be closed by the instruction on the

unreal and illusory nature of everything. Meditate in this way: ‘Alas! The father and mother, the great storm, the whirlwind, the thunder, the terrifying projections and all these apparent phenomena are illusory in their real nature. However they appear, they are not real. All substances are false and untrue. They are like a mirage, they are not permanent, they are not changeless. What is the use of desire? What is the use of fear? It is regarding the non-existent as existent. All these are projections of my mind, and since the mind itself is illusory and non-existent from the beginning, from where externally do they arise like this? I did not understand in this way before, and so I believed the nonexistent to exist, the untrue to be true, the illusion to be real; therefore I have wandered in saṃsāra for so long. And if I do not realise that they are illusions, I shall still wander in saṃsāra for a long time and certainly fall into the muddy swamp of suffering. Now they are all like dreams, like illusions, like echoes, like cities of the gandharvas, like mirages, like images, like optical illusions, like the moon in water; they are not real, even for a moment. Certainly they are not true, but false!’÷

“By concentrating one-pointedly on this conviction, belief in their reality is destroyed, and when one is inwardly convinced in such a way, belief in a self is counteracted. If you understand unreality like this from the bottom of your heart, the womb-entrance will certainly be closed.÷ *”] (pp. 85–86)

The perfect buddha state is what the soul should try to achieve. This state is characterised by permanence and not by the changes that we experience in our sublunary world. Only in this state is absolute liberation from the cycle of reincarnation possible, and thus annihilation of self.

“... O son of noble family, at this moment your state of mind is by nature pure emptiness, it does not possess any nature whatever, neither substance nor quality such as colour, but it is pure emptiness ... But this state of mind is not just blank emptiness, it is unobstructed, sparkling, pure and vibrant ... These two, your mind whose nature is emptiness without any substance whatever, and your mind which is vibrant and luminous, are inseparable ... This mind of yours is inseparable luminosity and emptiness in the form of a great mass of light, it has no birth or death, therefore it is the buddha of Immortal Light. To

recognise this is all that is necessary. When you recognise this pure nature of your mind as the buddha, looking into your own mind is resting in the buddha-mind.”÷ (p. 37)

The visual representation of these buddhas is in the form of a mandala—in Jung’s theory a symbol of the self. Similarly, *Worstward Ho*’s narrator struggles his way through an illusory universe in which all projections are identified as mere shades. Central in Beckett’s “mandala” of the self is the head sunk on crippled hands, whose clenched eyes are staring at the shades in the dim light of the empty space. Since everything emanates from the centre of this mandala, this head is also staring at itself: “scene and seer of all” (45):

First back on to three. Not yet to try worsen. Simply be there again. There in that head in that head. Be it again. That head in that head. Clenched eyes clamped to it alone. Alone? No. Too. To it too. The sunken skull. The crippled hands. Clenched staring eyes. Clenched eyes clamped to clenched staring eyes. Be that shade again. In that shade again. With the other shades. Worsening shades. In the dim void. (41)

The narrator tries hard to liberate himself from reality. He finds that the words and the shades are too realistic still to be able to discard them as illusionary. The situation in which he finds himself continues to bear too much resemblance to the material world:

Something not wrong with one. Meaning—meaning!—meaning the kneeling one. From now one for the kneeling one. As from now two for the twain. The as one plodding twain. As from now three for the head. The head as first said missaid. So from now. For to gain time. Time to lose. Gain time to lose. As the soul once. The world once.

Something not wrong with one. Then with two. Then with three. So on. Something not wrong with all. Far from wrong. Far far from wrong. The words too whosoever. What room for worse! How almost true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity! (36–38)

As long as the narrator uses words, he is not able to clear his mind completely, since the words have too many echoes in them of what is perceived as reality. All he can try to do is make the words as empty as possible and worsen the shades as much as possible to unrecognizable images, devoid of meaning.

So leastward on... To... Unworsenable worst.

What words for what then? How almost they still ring. As somehow from some soft of mind they ooze. From it in it ooze. How all but uninane. To last unlesenable least how loath to leasten. For then in utmost dim to unutter leastmost all. (64–65)

The mandala that the narrator has created is slowly and gradually transformed into an image in which the various details become less and less recognizable. When the image can finally be perceived in its entirety and full vision is possible, the narrator comes closest to his annihilation. He realises that complete liberation is out of the question when the mind is still oozing meaningful words. All he can do at the end of the text is move away from the mandala as far as possible, so that the image becomes unrecognizable, reduced to three pins (the kneeling shades) and one pinhole (the skull). Maybe enlightenment and liberation of self will follow. The reader, however, will never know, since for this to eventuate the words must end.

The achievement of *Worstward Ho* is the remarkable result of the synthesis of the many areas of Beckett's interest: religion, philosophy, psychology, language, art and representation. With its concerns with life and death and the nature of the mind, and bearing in mind the strong identification of the author with his narrator suggested in Volume 1, the text invites reading as a testimony of Beckett's world view.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

¹ Letter to James Knowlson, 11 April 1972, quoted in Knowlson, "Beckett's Bits of Pipe", in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, ed. Morris Beja et al., p. 16.

² Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text*, p. 137.

³ Varying the title, George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston wrote the equally successful *Eastward Hoe* (1605).

⁴ John Donne, "Hymne to God My God, in My Sicknesse", ll. 11–15.

⁵ One of John Pilling's interpretations of the title is a combination of the western journey to death (westwards) with "worst words", calling "death" the worst of words and referring to quotes from Shakespeare's *Othello*: "...give thy worst of thoughts/Thy worst of words" (III.iii) and *Julius Caesar*: "Give the word, Ho! and stand..." (IV.ii). (John Pilling, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–26). Certainly also to be included in a list of relevant Shakespearean allusions is Claudio's speech in Act III, Scene I of *Measure for Measure*:

Death is a fearful thing.
... [To] go we know not where;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death. (III.i.116–32)

⁶ We are grateful to Gerry Dukes for pointing this out.

⁷ *Dream*, p. 44; emphasis added. Even though it does bring death back in, compare also: "For the world, I count it not an inn, but an hospital; and a place not to live, but to die in." (Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, II, 11). In a possibly somewhat tongue-in-cheek part of his exposé of the title John Pilling also surmises the presence of the word "ward"—be it in a different sense: "Neither as fiction (putatively one's *worst*) nor as a shield (one's *ward*) against the facts of life can [*Worstward Ho*] be accounted a success. But as an exercise in failure it accomplishes the intractable task of going "nohow on" anyhow" ("Nohow On': *Worstward Ho*", p. 26).

⁸ Anton Chekhov, "Ward 6", in *Lady with Lapdog and Other Stories*, translated by David Magarshack, Penguin, 1975, p. 164.

⁹ For a long treatment of Beckett's longing for death and the notion of "positive annihilation", also placing it in a wider literary context, see Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*, Ch. 1.

¹⁰ To an Irish Catholic like Brendan Kennelly it is obvious from Beckett's works that the latter grew up in the Protestant community in the South of Ireland: "That is, he was one of the four percenters. The ninety-six percenters are the Catholics. Now I've often wondered what it must have been like to be a four percenter in the twenties and thirties, when Beckett used that lovely phrase, 'the Free State', with tremendous irony in several of his works. ... [Yet] I think Beckett is

a comic writer. He is comic in his dolefulness. He has a very sad Protestant face on him. ... He is a genuine Foxrock Protestant, a four percenter, a Parisian existentialist, a Trinity absurdist, and above all he demands not to be read but to be reread." ("The Four Percenter", in *Beckett in Dublin*, ed. S.E. Wilmer, Dublin, 1992, pp. 131–32.) "The monologues which result in such sumptuous minimalism had their roots in the author's Protestantism. ... The outcome of [his] anxious self-scrutiny was what Yeats called 'the quarrel with the self' and what one critic, Hugh Kenner, has called 'the issueless Protestant confrontation with conscience'. If Joyce remained obsessed by the Roman Catholic religion which he rejected, then Yeats and Beckett aestheticised elements of their childhood faith. Both turned east for, if not an explanation, then at least a moving expression of human bafflement in the face of creation. Many of Yeats's later poems emphasise the word 'nothing' as a positive just like the Beckettian character who joys in 'nothing' to be done." (Declan Kiberd, "Beckett and the Life to Come", *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82).

¹¹ Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Everyman, 1912, Meditation II, "On the Nature of the Human Mind" (pp. 85–86).

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 11, 75.6, (p. 110).

¹³ *Meditations*, "Synopsis" (p. 77).

¹⁴ *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 7, p. 368.

¹⁵ Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species, The Co-evolution of Language and the Human Brain*, London, 1997, p. 438.

¹⁶ Nearly all of Beckett's work poses similar questions. P.J. Murphy has, for example, traced Beckett's use of the tradition of the divided mind in *Murphy* to Spinoza's thoughts on the matter.

¹⁷ In *Texts for Nothing XIII*—which in many respects prefigures *Worstward Ho* (see Chapter 3, "Roots")—the narrator refers to a "galanty show" (a "pantomime on screen made by shadows of puppets") as well as "shades".

¹⁸ "Shadow theatre of it all" is later replaced by "Seat of all. Germ of all". Some wider reverberations of the shadow notion immediately come to mind, for example: "For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow" (Job 8:9); cf also Shakespeare's use of this thought in his many references to the insubstantiality of the pageant of our life on earth.

¹⁹ F.M. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 176, quoted in Plato, *The Republic*, tra. D. Lee, Penguin, 2nd edn, 1974, p. 264. Other traces of Plato's theory of the Forms can be found in Beckett's *oeuvre*. In *Watt*, for example, "it was just this hairbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that so excruciated Watt" (p. 78).

²⁰ Holograph manuscript of an unpublished play fragment entitled "Last Soliloquy". The quotation presented here is the putative text of the soliloquy as assembled from the fragmented speeches in the play (which are not meant to be acted in this form). The play dates from the 1980s, and consists of three leaves torn out of a notebook, measuring 15 x 22cm.

²¹ In *Samuel Beckett*, p. 262. The journal *Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* collected a number of psycho-analytical readings of Beckett's works in its fourth issue (1996).

²² See, for example, Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, pp. 175–81 and Lois Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett, 1906–1946*, New Haven and London, 1996, pp. 113–17.

²³ See C.G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice* (The Tavistock Lectures), London, 1968, p. 107.

²⁴ *The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious*, quoted in Liliane Frey-Rohn, *From Freud to Jung: A Comparative Study of the Psychology of the Unconscious*, Boston, Mass, 1974, p. 270.

²⁵ *Psychological Types*, quoted in *From Freud to Jung*, p. 270.

²⁶ According to Jung the symbol of the self cannot be distinguished from the symbol of the god-head. Cf. the comparison between the narrator and the God of the scripture above.

²⁷ *The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious*, quoted in *From Freud to Jung*, p. 69.

²⁸ The Dutch word “volledig”, meaning *completely*, also spells the words “vol” (full) and “ledig” (empty), and so is a good illustration of the paradoxical nature of the concept. See also the discussion on p. 92.

²⁹ Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett*, p. 114.

³⁰ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Boston and London, 1987, pp. xix-xx.

³¹ Jung brought his case of the young girl who had “never been born entirely” (see above) in connection with the “bardo” experience (*Analytical Psychology*, pp. 106–107).

CONCLUSION

In *Worstward Ho*, Beckett's last major prose work, all the well-worn themes from his earlier writings return. But if he succeeded anywhere in making his way out of the "literary culs-de-sac"¹ in which he found himself again and again it was in *Worstward Ho*. As *Worstward Ho* culminates in nothing, so Beckett's *oeuvre* culminates in *Worstward Ho*.

From the very beginning Beckett eschewed traditional fictional techniques. Perhaps because he was trying to shrug off the influence of the literary giants of his time, such as Proust or the James Joyce of *Ulysses*, Beckett was never attracted to the realist mode. Most of his works feature completely unreliable narrators, and his characterisation is always sketchy to say the least. Even the early work from *Dream* to *Watt* lacks rounded characters, a trait of Beckett's writing style which was definitely not much to the taste of the more conventional reader:

Beckett uses a number of techniques to dispel the illusion that his characters can be equated with people in the outer world. He reminds readers that they have before them, not life, but a book by Samuel Beckett. In *More Pricks than Kicks* Beckett includes an acknowledgment to himself as the author of a well-turned phrase. The narrator of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* reveals that his name is "Mr Beckett," and there is a narrator called Sam in *Watt*. At the same time, the peripheral figures in these novels are denied the rounding effect of conventional characterizations and begin to resemble puppets.

Dylan Thomas noticed this occurring in *Murphy* and assumed that it was an inadvertent flaw. According to Thomas, Neary is a failure as a character: he is "a slap-stick, a stuffed guy, when he moves; his mind is Mr. Beckett's mind...." But this is an effect of Beckett's refusal to provide conventional characterizations. Nor was he unaware of the apparent flaw: at one point his narrator indicates that most of the characters in *Murphy* are puppets.²

Beckett's narrators have always, even as early as *Dream*, tended to express a preference for the world of the interior, dismissing the external world with its

sociological, psychological, economical and political relations, and geographical, biological, physical and chemical facts:

[F]or two months and more [Belaqua] lay stretched in the cup, sheltered from the winds and sheltered from the waters, knowing that his own velleities of radiation would never scale the high rim that he had contrived all around and about, that they would trickle back and replenish his rumination as marriage the earth and virginity paradise, that he could release the boomerangs of his fantasy on all sides unanxiously, that one by one they would return with the trophy of an echo. He lay lapped in a beatitude of indolence that was smoother than oil and softer than a pumpkin, dead to the dark pangs of the sons of Adam, asking nothing of the insubordinate mind. He moved with the shades of the dead and the dead-born and the unborn and the never-to-be-born, in a Limbo purged of desire. They moved gravely, men and women and children, neither sad nor joyful. They were dark, and they gave a dawn light to the darker place where they moved. They were a silent rabble, a press of much that was and was not and was to be and was never to be, a pulsing and shifting as of a heart beating in sand, and they cast a dark light.

If that is what is meant by going back into one's heart, could anything be better, in this world or the next? The mind, dim and hushed like a sick-room, like a chapelle ardente, thronged with shades; the mind at last its own asylum, disinterested, indifferent, its miserable, erethisms and discriminations and futile sallies suppressed; the mind suddenly reprieved, ceasing to be an annex of the restless body, the glare of understanding switched off. The lids of the hard aching mind close, there is suddenly gloom in the mind; not sleep, not yet, nor dream, with its sweats and terrors, but a waking ultra-cerebral obscurity, thronged with grey angels; there is nothing of him left but the umbra of grave and womb where it is fitting that the spirits of his dead and his unborn should come abroad.

He understood then, when he came out of the tunnel, that that was the real business, the Simon Pure of this frail life that has already been described as being all temptation and knighthood, fake temptations and sham squabbles, highly delightful underclothes (*dessous de femme* "Mystère") and boy-scouts, patrol-leader Charlie chasing the barley. Torture by thought and trial by living,

because it was fake thought and false living, stayed outside the tunnel. But in the umbra, the tunnel, when the mind went wombtomb, then it was real thought and real living, living thought. ... In the umbra and the tunnel no exchanges, no flight and flow, no *Bachkrankheit*, but thought moving alive in the darkened mind gone wombtomb. (*Dream*, pp. 43–45)

Here the narrator clearly voices his Platonic desire for detachment, emphasising the superior reality of the world of the mind. Beckett's reading of Schopenhauer's philosophy, together with his experience of Jungian psychoanalysis, have been discussed as significant pointers to the inward direction that his writing was to take increasingly from his "revelation" in the mid-1940s, but especially from *The Unnamable*. Within the "trilogy" the same inward-tending movement may be detected, leading the reader deep into the mental realm of the unnamable thinker of *The Unnamable*. *The Unnamable* is the fertile soil that gave growth to all of Beckett's later fiction, from which the "occasion" of "fake thought and false living" is almost fully banned.

The monologue is the natural formal and stylistic counterpart to the subject of the "mind gone wombtomb". The dramatic work is no exception—even when there is more than one character involved. In *Endgame* the protagonists are locked in a skull-like interior world. The speaker in *A Piece of Monologue* does not act out the actions he narrates, because the play consists of memories and imagination alone. In *Rockaby* and *That Time* the characters listen to their own inner voice. And *Film* is completely silent (with the exception of the soft silencing sound "sssh!"), because the actions are shown to take place ultimately in the interior world of the main character.

Beckett's post-*Unnamable* oeuvre (including the plays) can be seen as a descent into the hell or purgatory of the mind and is in this way reminiscent of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. All post-*Unnamable* works put together in chronological order could be regarded as a contemporary *Commedia*—with the one important difference that there is no progress to a godhead. This, however, does not mean that a godhead is completely absent from the oeuvre. The "descent" in Beckett's work can be divided into two. There are texts about the unself—others, figments of the author's imagination—and there are texts about the projected self of the author. The others sometimes suspect the presence of a godhead, but in the texts of the

self the absence of a godhead is emphasised so often by the narrator that the effect is that of a pervasive presence. The same effect may be observed in the case of the pictures of the loved ones in *A Piece of Monologue*, which are absent, the speaker having torn them to pieces, but which through their very absence have become all too visible in the speaker's memory. God as "The bastard!" who does not exist (*Endgame*, p. 38) is the paradox underlying all these texts. The *oeuvre* could thus be called a "godless comedy".³

God's absent presence looming large over the familiar mindscapes beyond the phenomenal world is one pervading characteristic of Beckett's work; the other being the continuous stream of reasoning words. With words—his only loves, his only enemies, and always his only tools—the narrator strives to achieve ever greater voidness in the mind, always failing, since words are signs inherited from the world. Words are therefore tortured, contorted, repeated *ad nauseam*, ellipsed to virtual incomprehension, all in the service of rendering them as inane as possible.

Inane; dim; waste; void; willess shades: almost every word of *Worstward Ho*, beginning with the very title, appears, superficially at any rate, to have been carefully selected to set a tone of pessimist gloom. In this respect *Worstward Ho* is not unique in Beckett's work. In a review of *Not I* Dennis Potter wrote what must be among the harshest criticism ever to appear of any of Beckett's works:

Would Solzhenitsyn have understood? Would the Jews on the way to the gas chamber? Question: is this the art which is the response to the despair and pity of our age, or is it made of the kind of futility which helped such desecrations of the spirit, such filth of ideologies come into being?⁴

Potter's exasperation is a more intense form of an often felt uneasiness with Beckett's themes, as well as his treatment of them. Hopelessness, gloom, pessimism, even nihilism, are the catchwords often thrown up at Beckett, and especially in connection with his drama. That Beckett wallows in the mire of human despair, the pointlessness of life, and the inadequacy of language for human communication is a case against him which deserves to be answered.⁵ It is, after all, not difficult to see how the angst-ridden text of *Not I* could have inspired such a response. Equally it would not be inconceivable for a similar verdict to be reached about *Worstward Ho* with well over a hundred occurrences of *bad*, *worse* and *worsen*; one hundred oc-

currences of *dim* in various forms; over fifty of *void* and twenty of *fail*. But however understandable, to regard *Worstward Ho* as the product of unmitigated, inhuman nihilism would be a gross misinterpretation of Beckett's text.

In the progression of Beckett's godless comedy *Worstward Ho* represents the last canto. In this leastmost of all texts characters have become willess shades, their state reduced to such an extent that they have sunk to the level of the other "characters": the inanemost words, the dimmest light and—how minimal can one get—the blanks between the inanemost words and the vast wastes of void. But these gloomy words should not be allowed to hide Beckett's accomplishment, in which failure coincides with success. Through his relentless reasoning the narrator has achieved a state of reduction in which all is about to vanish: the shades, the dim, the words, the blanks—all except the void in which they are about to be subsumed. If it were not for the fact that the fullness of the void is beyond words, Beckett can be said in *Worstward Ho* to have found his "language for being" and to have achieved his Nothing, than which, to speak with Geulincx, "nothing is more real". In this, Beckett's achievement may be compared to Dante's in the *Divina Commedia*. After his long journey among the shades in Hell and Purgatory, *Paradise* ends at the moment of his supreme revelation. Face to face with this vision of the oneness of all, words fail him:

So my mind, completely in suspense, gazing motionless and intent, grew ever more ardent as it watched.

To see that light is so overwhelming that it is impossible to turn away from it voluntarily to look at another sight,

because the good, the object of the will, is completely gathered in it; what is perfect in that light, is imperfect outside of it.

From now on my words will fall short, even for the things that I remember, more so than the language of an infant sucking at the breast.

Not because the living light at which I gazed contained more than one single image, for it is always what it was before,

but because my sight, which grew stronger as I gazed, seemed to be changing that single image, while in fact it was I who was changing.

In the deep and bright essence of that exalted light three circles appeared to me, varying in colour, but all of the same size:

And the first circle seemed to reflect the second, as one rainbow another, and the third looked like a fire which was breathed equally by the others.

How inadequate are words, and how weak, to express the image in my head! And this image compares so poorly to what I saw, that even to call it poor is too much.

O eternal light, that dwells only within yourself, only knows yourself, and so, known and knowing, loves yourself and smiles at yourself!

When I had studied that circle, which had appeared in you as a reflection of light, attentively for some time,

it seemed to me to carry within itself, coloured like itself, the image of us humans, and therefore my sight was completely absorbed by it.

As the geometrician strives hard to square the circle, but is unable to find the principle he is looking for by means of thought,

so was I in the face of that new vision: I wanted to see how that image fitted in the circle and found a place in it;

For this my wings were too weak. But then my mind was struck by a flash of lightning which fulfilled my wish.

Here the flight of my imagination failed; but already my desire and will were moved, like a wheel revolving evenly,

by the love that moves the sun and the other stars. (*Paradise*, Canto XXXIII, ll. 97–145)

Where the flight of Dante's imagination (which includes reason) fails, revelation takes over like "a flash of lightning".⁶ Similarly at the end of *Worstward Ho*, after reason fails, the narrator experiences a sudden revelation when his last remains of mind recognise the arrival of the last moment before nothingness, when there will be no more mind and no more words: "Nohow on". Both Dante and the narrator of *Worstward Ho* experience a vision of eternity—Dante one of eternal bliss; Beckett's narrator one of eternal nothingness. Both are visions of oneness, and so essentially joyful. Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Beckett's godless comedy are thus both *comedias* in the medieval sense: tales that begin unhappily but end happily.

NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

¹ S.E. Gontarski in his Introduction to *Nohow On*, p. ix.

² Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction*, Urbana and Chicago, 1984, p. 10.

³ See Ruud Hisgen and Adriaan van der Weel, "Becketts goddeloze komedie", *Bzzlletin* no 193 (February 1992), pp. 9–15.

⁴ *Sunday Times*, 24 April 1977, quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 636.

⁵ P.J. Murphy also takes exception to this bleak view in his *Reconstructing Beckett: Language for Being in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto, 1990). But whatever Beckett's attitude to the status of language as a means of human communication, the idea that he might have promulgated his opinion in any public sense, let alone as "a great moralist who is concerned with how one is to live" (*Reconstructing Beckett*, p. 171) is unlikely.

⁶ Compare also St Augustine's account of his conversion, *Confessions*, Book VIII.

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