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(un)Wordward Ho

Decreation and the Voiding of Language in Beckett's Late Prose Work

An attempt to offer inroads into Beckett's late short prose, especially the *Stirrings Still* and *Nohow On* "trilogies," the present paper proposes an exploration of the strategies by which linguistic expectations, as well as expectations pertaining to "literariness" – stable reference, figuration, allusion – are thwarted and disrupted. This overt denial of figuration creates an absence, a transgression of normal linguistic implications which does not so much eliminate as *call into being by erasing* all such implications. Its effect of extreme compression, of baring language to the bone rests mainly on the traces, on the residua of figuration/allusion which cannot be eliminated, cultural encoding which, in a context that refuses any but the strictest literal meaning, provides the peculiar linguistic humour of these texts: a humour of absences, of structures erased yet still shaping the utterance that has displaced them. A side-effect of this rigorous reduction/erasure is a peculiar excess of language: a semiosis where the signifier undergoes semantic, referential and thematic variation. This eventually results in an epiphany of language, based on the undoing of the distinction between linguistic figure and communicative phenomenon. The radically open, self-baring self-reflexive text is (in) the event of reading, even if the reading is not (in) the text.

> Less. Less seen. Less seeing. Less seen and seeing when with words than when not. When somehow than when nohow. 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. (*Worstward Ho*, *NO* 111)[1]

Beckett's late prose texts, starting where *Textes pour rien / Texts for Nothing* end, revisiting and endlessly reworking the themes and texts of the earlier fiction, seem reduction reduced. Their most striking linguistic and stylistic feature is an apparent absence of style (in the sense of Barthes's *le degré zéro de l'écriture*), a stripping of

1. All parenthetical references are to this edition: Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho. Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

language to the bone – a thorough, radical minimalism that goes against all (apparent or hidden) figuration/rhetoric. As against common language use, with its wealth of clichés and idioms, and the so-called "literary language" characterized by a heightened figuration and denser rhetoric, Beckett's texts *de*create literary works that redefine the act of reading; they constitute *events* by virtue of linguistic surfaces that work as blanks, writings without style,[2] forever striving towards pure denotation, the *perfected present* of writing. This writing permanently *undoes* itself, arguably in the manner of Bram van Velde's painting as conceived by Beckett in the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*[3] or, to resort to another non-literary Beckett analogy from the famous letter to Axel Kaun, it violently exposes "drops of silence within silence" – veritable narrative, linguistic "egregious gaps"[4] – akin to the pauses which tear up the musical texture of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony: "Is there any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface should not be dissolved, as for example the sound surface of Beethoven's Seventh

2. As early as 1932 in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier, Dublin: Black Cat, 1992) the claim of "writing without style" appears with a thematic insistence in Beckett's writing: the early, exuberantly metafictional English prose works are haunted by the realization that English (Anglo-Irish) was ill fit at core for his artistic vision, in contrast with French, in which "it was easier to write without style" (*DFMW*, p. 48). In the 1937 German letter to Axel Kaun where Beckett, tripping in the wake of Mauthner and Schopenhauer, first formulates his poetics of the "Unwort," a link between "style" and "writing in formal English" appears: "And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying beyond it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask." (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, Vol. I, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 518). As Beckett confided in several interviews, "stylelessness" could be achieved via French; his chosen language appeared to him as a means to "cut away the excess" and "strip away the colour," to "boost the possibility of stylelessness" and "reach pure communication": cf. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 357, 257. Such "excess" and "colour" seem to have been stylistic flaws that Beckett associated with the stylized language and the "Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatisms" (Knowlson 357) characteristic of Revivalist writers. For a recent discussion of Beckett's resistance to the legacy of the Revival, as well as the multifaceted incorporation of the process of translation into his writing – which also allows for an echoing of the cultural anxieties regarding questions of language/style in Ireland in the aftermath of the Revival – see Emilie Morin, "Translation as Principle of Composition" in *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (London-N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 55–95.

3. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), pp. 138–145.

4. I borrow the term of H. Porter Abbott, as discussed in his essay "Narrative," in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 7–29.

Symphony is devoured by huge black pauses, so that for pages on end we cannot perceive it as other than a dizzying path of sounds connecting unfathomable chasms of silence?"[5] Self-reduction, responsible for the perpetuation of the work's "I'll go on," is made into the very subject and motivation of the texts that, according to Derrida, "make the limits of our language tremble."[6]

"So again and again": writing progressive self-reductions

The extent to which self-reduction becomes the subject of these writings is best exemplified by the programmatic revisiting, rewriting, ghosting of the earlier texts, which yields a dense network of intra-intertextual relationships in the late work.[7] This (meta)thematization of the text undoing, revoking and, in the event, re-establishing the prior texts tends to become "a rhetorical turn in itself, generating new substance out of opposition made of resistance, where the tools of resistance become the thing itself."[8] In this extended intra-intertext one text may generate the other (the imaginary space of *Imagination Dead Imagine,* 1965, is rewritten into

5. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1920–1940*, pp. 518–19. For a discussion of Beckett's late prose in terms of musical pauses and active fragmentation see Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction in Different Words* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121–140.

6. "This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 33–76. In the same interview Derrida justifies his own silence on Beckett on grounds that he feels "both too close and too distant" to the author to be able to "respond" to his writing – although the constant preoccupations of his work on the one hand and, on the other hand, his identification of writing with a desire for mastery and, consequently, his claim for resisting this mastery by "affranchising oneself – in every field where law can lay down the law" in the "institutionless institution" called literature, in the same interview (36, 41) ring with an all too perceptible resonance of Beckett. For a comprehensive treatment of Beckett and/in Derrida see Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007).

7. I borrow the term coined by Brian Fitch, "Just Between Texts: Intra-Intertextuality," in *The Narcissistic Text: A Reading of Camus' Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 89–108; *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 23–37. Among the seminal investigations of the writing of new texts out of, or folding upon earlier texts, as well as an ever more pronounced intra-intertextual communication across Beckett's theatre and prose works, Susan Brienza's work needs to be mentioned: *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

8. Andrew Renton, "Disabled Figures. From the Residua to Stirrings Still," in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 169.

Ping, 1966) or may, with a strongly self-referential gesture, "erase" the other; strategic inversions between works may undo the prior(itized) text and, in the light of this undoing, rewrite the new texts. *Enough* (1965) opens with a passage that "annuls" the prior texts, but does so with a thorough revocation of any position of authority it might seem to claim:

> All that goes before forget. Too much at a time is too much. That gives the pen time to note . . . . When the pen stops I go on. Sometimes it refuses. When it refuses I go on. Too much silence is too much. Or it's my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft. (*CSP*, 186)[9]

While the first sentence seems to confer on the text a status of priority over all the previous writing, stating its definitive character, the passage withdraws all such implications by a dismissal of the text/voice as a source of authority/meaning – the text appearing, rather, as a continuous becoming whose source is located beyond the control of the voice speaking: "so much for the art and craft." At the same time the text's radical indeterminacy and general grammatical brokenness allow for contending readings of "forget" (forgot/forgotten), turning "all that goes before" into both the subject and the object of the act of forgetting, playing on a text that thematizes the failure to remember its own pre-texts.

A reverse movement, of one text generating the other, is at work in the sequence *All Strange Away* (1963–64) – *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) – *Ping* (1966): the title of the second is the opening of the first, while the second's dialogic opening takes up the situation of the impossible "imagination dead" where the previous text leaves it off.

> Imagination dead imagine. A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it, that again. (*All Strange Away*, *CSP* 169)
> No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not yet dead, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness of the rotunda. (*Imagination Dead Imagine*, *CSP* 182)

Similarly, the closing image of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, of a "white speck lost in whiteness," is the starting point for *Ping*: "All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn" (*CSP* 193) – as though the exhortation of *The Unnamable*, to *go on*, were gradually transformed into a return to/on the text

9. All parenthetical references are to this edition: Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995).

to the extent that the motivation behind the late texts, indeed their subject if one may speak of a subject in the case of these *post-narrative* (or, with Porter Abbott's term, *narratricidal*) texts becomes, how to keep *re*writing.[10]

This movement towards an ever more pronounced self-referential structure and continuous self-rewriting – culminating in the three "novels" of the *Stirrings Still* trilogy – produces texts almost entirely made up of echoes from the previous prose and drama work. Always under ways to becoming a sculptural object, of which the published version is but a temporary solidification, these texts deal not with a sought-for objectivity of language but rather, with an *objecthood* of language, the ultimate stage in such "solidification" being represented by *Worstward Ho*, the untranslatable autograph. Both the *Stirrings Still* and the *Nohow On* "trilogies" seem reproposed, reiterated attempts against (the same) content, converging in their endlessly approached moment before absolute stillness. They reach a non-narrative closure of near-stasis from where it becomes ever more problematic for writing to perpetuate itself – in the event, producing an unending/unendable text where the refusal to progress, the attempt at absolute stasis turn the writing into an endlessly self-generating and self-reading text on (*so-called*) ending.

"In a word all the summits": strategies of defiguration

The language of these late prose works, obstinately refusing figuration, is continuously reduced to the physical, purely denotative sense – an "utterly bare" use of words, a language use displaying a "hidden literality," and termed "positivist" by Stanley Cavell, in its wish to escape connotation, rhetoric, the non-cognitive as well as "awkward memories of ordinary language."[11] A turning of all figuration into the strictest physical, spatial terms is one of the most striking qualities of the texts of the *Fizzles*, as Shira Wolosky points out. *Defiguring* – with Beckett's term, *voiding* – a long tradition of journey/quest-narratives (a deconstruction of which is already proposed in the anti-picaresque narrative of *Murphy*), *Fizzle 1* maps the tortuous progress of an unidentified human figure in a closed space that resembles an under-

10. Cf. H. Porter Abbott, "Narratricide: Samuel Beckett as Autographer," *Romance Studies* 11 (Winter 1987), pp. 35–46. That Beckett's late prose works are to be read in terms of an ever denser self-referential structure and a continuous rewriting of earlier texts is an opinion almost generally shared by recent Beckett criticism; a significant contribution to reading the last "trilogies," as indicated in the title, is Charles Krance's study, *"Worstward Ho* and On-words: Writing to(wards) the Point," in *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Lance St John Butler & Robin J. Davis (London: Macmillan, 1990).

11. "Ending the Waiting Game," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 117–37, *passim*.

ground tunnel, reducing the action and all its temporal implications to a spatial, sequential movement, to the *plotting* of a course through space. The time adverbials "now, again, yet, until, at last, yet again" measure minimal *spatial* relations, "exploring just how curtailed and restricted the meanings of such terms can become when allowed to function only within the limits of spatial context."[12] The overview of this *unworded* journey cuts off almost aggressively all the moral, emotional, religious, psychological implications of progress (becoming), paring down all traditional metaphysical associations to the point where personal "history"/progress becomes a series of shifts, gropings in space:

> In any case little by little *his history takes shape*, with if not yet exactly its good days and bad, at least studded with occasions passing rightly or wrongly *for outstanding*, such as the straitest narrow, the loudest fall, the most lingering collapse, the steepest descent, the greatest number of successive turns the same way, the greatest fatigue, the longest rest, the longest – aside from the sound of the body on its way – silence. Ah yes, and the most rewarding passage *of the hands, on the one hand*, the feet, *on the other*, over all those parts of the body within their reach. And the sweetest wall lick. *In a word all the summits*. Then other summits, hardly less elevated, such as a shock so rude that it rivalled the rudest of all.
>
> (*CSP* 227–8, *my emphasis*)

The passage *un*words such words as "good, bad, outstanding, straitest narrow, fall, collapse, steepest descent" which lose all sense but that of physical/spatial dimension and direction; stripped of all figurative overtones, "all the summits" becomes an enlisting of shifts of position. This overt denial of figuration creates an absence, a transgression of normal linguistic implications/expectations which does not so much eliminate as *call into being by erasing* such expectations. At the same time, the de-figuration performed by the text returns language to the "place" where figuration "takes place" – that is, it brings about a re-figuration which is in its own way representational. The effect of scrupulous paring down rests to no little extent on the traces, the residua of figuration which cannot be eliminated, allusion, cultural encoding which, in a context that allows for the strictest literal meaning only, give the peculiar linguistic humour of these texts: "Beckett's language is literal because it defeats expected literary figures that it inevitably recalls. It is a humour of absences, of structures erased yet still shaping the utterance that has displaced them."[13] Such humour

12. Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 52.

13. Wolosky, p. 53.

may be sensed in the resonance of certain clichés, turns-of-phrase, almost in spite of the text's reductions: in the text above, for instance, in the juxtaposition of the literal and figurative use of "hand" ("on the one hand"). Such a residual dead metaphor of language throws an ironic sidelight on the (explicitly) blind crawling of the character:

> For he might well have succeeded, in the end, up to a point, which would have *brightened things up for him*, nothing like a ray of light, from time to time, to brighten things up for one. And all may yet grow light, at any moment, first dimly and then – how can one say? – then more and more, till all is flooded with light, the way, the ground, the walls, the vault, without his being one whit the wiser . . . . The heart? No complaints. It's going again, enough *to see him through*. (*CSP* 225, *my emphasis*)

Such humour, arising from linguistic expectations frustrated and underlined at the same time, constantly turning attention to the way language is conceived of, is at work already in the *Trilogy* and *Texts for Nothing*, for instance in the Unnamable's sizing up of [his] whereabouts: "From centre to circumference in any case *it is a far cry* and I may well be situated somewhere between the two"[14] – a sentence that, despite its striving to reduce all sense to the literal (if such a statement is possible at all in the context of *The Unnamable*), foregrounds the nature of the speaker, of *mere voice*. Pure denotation exposes and undermines the appeal to reference as the controlling principle of language use: if our world is defined by the use of discourse, then Beckett's late prose anatomizes discourse as the condition of living in the world/of making sense of the world. The striving of writing against figuration reveals that figuration occurs despite itself, is built in the very structure of language:

> Closed place. All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said. Did it need to be known it would be. No interest. Not for imagining. (*F5*, *CSP* 236)

Another aspect of the anti-representational stance of the late prose, closely linked to the more general context of de-figurative devices, is found in the, strangely converging, strategy of making language increasingly mathematical, in the reduction of representation to mathematical formulae and quantities.[15] While this proce-

14. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 295.

15. Although the present essay merely brackets Beckett's mathematization of language, as it does not propose to address its broader implications, it must be pointed out that this pervasive trait of both the prose and (late) theatre texts is inextricably linked to the, more gen-

dure is already playfully proposed in the Cartesian framework of *Murphy* – in the inventory of Celia's body for instance, or in the movements of the chess game between Murphy and Mr Endon – it comes into its own with *Watt* and, later, *Molloy* where, other than metafictional game, fiction makes an attempt at exhaustively comprehending the "real" through turning everything into endless lists of permutations and combinations: of the dogs systematically starved to eat the rest of Knott's dinner for instance, or of Molloy's sucking stones. The late prose works keep paring down and revisiting fictional spaces and shards of narrative (physical movement), turning these to pure (mathematical) extension, geometrical dimension. In parallel with his pursuits in the works for the theatre (ranging from *Film* to the pure mathematical abstraction of *Quad*), the short prose eliminates everything but quantitative measure – number, figure, magnitude, duration, extension. In *All Strange Away* space is presented in mathematical figures: "Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try for him there" (*CSP* 169), continuing in the mathematization of bodily positions and sexual intercourse. Similarly, geometry takes over in the radically reified, de-realized world of "that white speck lost in whiteness" in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Ping*:

> Till all white in the whiteness of the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure. Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of the vault. Two diameters at right angles AB CD divide the white ground into two semicircles ACB BDA. Lying on the ground two white bodies, each in its semicircle. (*CSP* 182)

> Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just. Traces blurs light grey almost white on white. Hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle. (*CSP* 193)

This move into mathematical reduction eerily corresponds to the reductions of literalist language: the depiction of plots by carefully calculated mathematical/geometrical configurations, lists etc., eliminates from the text all emotional experience, rendering (or, rather, bracketing) the ineffable through placement/duration –

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eral, literalism of the Beckett canon. The mathematical reductions and use of mathematical figures and formulae is congruent with the physical reductions redefining reality, by a programmatic elimination of all secondary qualities, in Cartesian-Newtonian thought – a stable subtext of Beckett's early English fiction, *Murphy* and (especially) *Watt*. These novels, as well as the late short prose where all activity is systematically reduced to pure (mathematical, geometrical) extension/dimension, have long been exhaustively discussed as forging a language for reproducing the mechanistic world of Cartesian philosophy. For a treatment of Beckett's mathematization of language in the context of de-figuration see Wolosky, pp. 51–89.

in this respect, harking back to the (similarly Cartesian-minded) exhaustive pseudo-scientific cataloguing of the "real" in Joyce's "Ithaca" which manages to highlight emotion through its ostentatious absence. This radical objectifying operates through mathematics and mathematical discourse, which comprise the non-physical and the non-sensible only, thus situating itself on the "metaphysical" pole of figuration, transferring meaning to a purely figural plane. The opposite movement, of defiguration, through delimiting meaning to the strictly literal, eliminates the possibility of a figural language/reading.[16]

From "nohow" to "nohow on": writing remainders

Beckett's (late) writing comes as close as literature has ever come to eradicating the figural – yet its existence, its "for to end yet again" is made possible by the very fact that figuration, inherent in language, resists its undoing, occurring almost despite itself. The work is founded on an impossibility: in the "obligation to express," the ultimate obligation to figuration (*Three Dialogues*) coupled with the obligation to undo figuration, to resist it in/through writing – this being extensively thematized in the recurring placement of narrative under the sign of ever-deferred ending ("yet again") and ever-deferred beginning.

A text such as *Imagination Dead Imagine* does not depict, but produces its world as it "speaks";[17] starting with *Texts for Nothing*, a movement from representation to the representation of (linguistic) representation can be seen. Beckett's "hermeneutics of experience" (Locatelli) proceeds by an ongoing unwording of narrative conventions, images, structures and even of (one's own) texts; by so doing, it probes into the elementary structure of our interpretation/construction of reality – our basic mode of being in the world. In the short prose texts and the late "novels," the (apparent) content of representation is always only given in order to be exceeded by reduction, and "the destructurization of cognitive patterns becomes a

16. Wolosky, pp. 61–64, discusses Beckett's mathematization of language in terms of Derrida's deconstruction of the structure of metaphor, as the transposition into the realm of the non-sensible of the supposedly sensible, a transposition which rests on the distinction between the sensible and non-sensible as evoked by the terms *literal* and *figural*. Mathematics, in the order of (essentially metaphysical) Western thinking, is seen to both evade and fulfil metaphoric transfer in its attempt to assert the non-sensible ("metaphysical") pole of figuration only – thus it both completes and surpasses metaphoric structure, accomplishing the transfer of meaning to a purely figural plane. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythologies," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–272.

17. Susan Brienza, " 'Imagination dead imagine': The Microcosm of the Mind," in *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8 (Autumn 1982) 59–74.

successive cognitive pattern, in incessant dynamism."[18] The Beckett canon shows a trajectory from negation to subtraction, from silence to "unsaying," from "over" to "*un*over"/"not – yet – again." Beckett's work is intrinsically open: "his communicative strategies question communication as they enact it; his subtractions transform words into echoes, and echoes into pure sound, still speaking; his endless combinations corrode the cultural marking of experience, and his impotence shows ineliminable creativity."[19]

The opening sentence of *Imagination Dead Imagine* in many ways foreshadows the turning of writing into a dialogical space, towards the dramatization of writing – the realization that writing/representation is an *event* which produces its world as it speaks: "No trace anywhere of life, *you say, pah*, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, *yes, dead, good*, imagination dead imagine" (*CSP* 182, my emphasis). In the *Nohow On* trilogy this dialogic, communicative *event*-nature of writing proposes a reassessment of language/representation as *mis*saying: from *Ill Seen Ill Said* to *Worstward Ho,* a *Sprachgeworfenheit*, a Heideggerian being-thrown-into-language as an inescapable condition is compulsively (re)enacted, where the second novel's development towards an unreachable degree zero of representation restates the fact that speech/representation cannot be eliminated simultaneously with the fact that representation is an event, the mechanism of our being in the world. Language and its use are de-mystified, all saying exposed as *mis*saying, representation shown as a chain of semiosis – yet, paradoxically, it is missaying only that allows for a never-ending (negative) perfection of failure: "Fail again. Fail better."[20] Accordingly, Beckett's critical epistemology offers a re-evaluation of speech where the linguistic system is played off against communication, reference against representation. What is made visible is the event of communication, a communication enacted in an impersonal language, exposing inescapable representation:

18. Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the Word: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works after the Nobel Prize* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 29.

19. Locatelli, p. 29.

20. The "progress" of better(ing) failure is brought into play by the very title of *Nohow On / Worstward Ho:* the textual trope of progress, grounded in the nineteenth-century language of combat, harks back to both (nineteenth-century) Christian hymnology ("Onward, Christian soldiers!") and the ideal of expansion inherent in the great exploration sagas. The title is a parodic turning inside out of Charles Kingsley's emblematic poem of the Westward course of Victorian Britain, *Westward Ho!* (1855) – itself echoing the title of John Webster and Thomas Dekker's *Westward Hoe* (1607). See Porter Abbott, "The Trope of Onwardness," in *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 32–42.

> On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.
> Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid.
> Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. . . .
> 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 remain.
> (*Worstward Ho*, *NO* 89–90)

Worstward Ho is, in the Beckett canon, the text of irreducible reductions – of a "meremost minimum" of missaying. This narratricidal text (H. Porter Abbott) thematizes processes of reduction at work. If John Pilling, as early as 1982, defined the first "novel" of the *Nohow On* trilogy, *Company/Compagnie*, as a palimpsest of compressions,[21] then the label is all the more fitting for the very last prose text Beckett produced – a palimpsest resulting from extreme compression, but also because it enacts communication, positioning an undefinable "other" in the successive withdrawals of its enunciations. The opening line – starting, significantly, with the word that enacts the non-closure ending of *The Unnamable*, and which undoes any sense of an ending in *Worstward Ho* as well ("Said nohow on") – infers by its double withdrawal how any entity/condition, proposed as self-standing, independent (of human presence/will) is linked to, in as far as mediated by, human perception/linguistic interpretation ("Say on"). In a string of sentences cut back to a grammatical "meremost minimum" which makes any filling-in of the subject position impossible, the communicative mechanics of the world is enacted: if the "On" provides a (hypothetical non-human, non-mediated) background to perception/mediation, this exists/can be hypothesized precisely in the communicative movement of "Say on." The "say," the interpretive, perceptive way of being in the world is at one with *being* in the world ("on"); by the mechanics of communication, the articulation of this interpretive way of being-in-the-world presupposes the interpreter's secondary status in relation to language in which all such position is articulated (*"be said* on"). Being can be represented, articulated only as one with perception and, specifically, as one with linguistic perception, to which no subject position can be attached. "Say" at the same time functions as the basic enunciation, enactment of conjuring up, imagining, fictionalizing – cf. say a body, "say bones . . . say ground" or, "imagination dead *imagine"* an impossible imaginative act which states the going on of imagination in the moment of decreeing its death.

21. John Pilling's review of *Company*, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 7 (Spring 1982) 127–31.

This double thematization of being-in-language is referred to a progress from "somehow" to "nohow," a "nohow" which itself is positioned as an effect of language: "said nohow on." The condition of "nohow on" can only be imagined, turned into language, it remains outside the range of experience/of the known. "*Said* nohow on," with which the novel comes full circle, functions as a double withdrawal: on the one hand, "nohow" can be perceived only inasmuch as encoded in language, "said nohow"; on the other hand, the very linguistic encodedness of "nohow *on*" defeats inasmuch as it erases/contradicts the sense of an ending. The impossibility of saying a referential "nohow" is underlined throughout the novel, connoting it as false (*mis*said nohow), for it hides the position of *being* without which it is impossible to say it; the denotative negation in "nohow" conceals the assertive position of *being* from which it is said. As an effect of repetition, a hiatus between the "subject" and predicate of sentences is illuminated, pointing at the impossibility of absolute retraction of what has been uttered: the series of retractions produce a movement of communication, enunciation. Repetition is a prime procedure in these texts for showing semantic, referential instability; thus it constitutes an outlet for semiosis, for excess of language.

What is even more striking in this text is its openness, its dialogic structure. The orientation of the sentences, their connotative function plays a more important role than their denotative message; the "what" of the information conveyed becomes secondary to the "how" of communication, bound to the subjective positions of addresser and addressee, even if these are inscribed in a text which appears as scrupulously impersonal. The text, while unwording/"unknowing" language to its attainable extreme, nevertheless attests to the presence of residua of communication – of an addressee. The presence of this addressee, indefinite and unlocalized as "it" may be, is nevertheless inscribed in each of the successive "better failures," experiences in reduction of narrative content, authorial authority:

> 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*.

Image, narrative are evoked, enacted, and cancelled in an ongoing dialogic relation; image literally takes shape, is *embodied* in/through communication, in a text which obstinately thematizes its constituent basis, the presupposition of an addressee. The text is thus permanently on the way *on*, from a source that cannot be established and that is constantly disempowered, to an equally un-definable destination, in a permanent not-yet-again of arrival, striving for an embodiment which results in a paring down of image/in disembodiment – to a textual knowing as *unknowing*. The fragment stands for the strength of linguistic creation also in charting

the process by which the signifier defers the signified, creating a play of meaning. The reoccurrence of the signifier ("stand") accounts for its semantic transformations and thus for the expression of difference: semantic variation produces by-plays of meaning ("stand" is progressively transformed into "bear"/"remain"); referential variation, similarly, produces a play of meaning ("Say bones. No bones but *say bones*") and a combinatory, entirely narrative-textual variation ("Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand"). In this way, from what seems a thorough linguistic reduction/erasure (which, however, is never turned into a negation of language, but, rather, into a reaffirmation of the event of communication), a fertile play, a multiplication of meaning emerges through the progressive discrepancy between (textual/narrative) sign and (textual) referent, and the consequent highlighting of the relation of contextual elements with *co-textual* ones. The text exposes its apparent semantic contradictions and by this act makes its reader aware of its textual enunciations – fictional (pseudo-referents) and co-textual (of the textual space). Out of a *refusal* of absolute negation a differentiation of meaning issues: "the fact that the 'said' and the 'saying' are played off one against the other. . . points to a relevant epistemic reciprocity and to a significant *difference*. . . In fact, in *Worstward Ho* Beckett often substitutes diegetical equivalents with mimetic repetitions, so that his new conception of language reveals both an uncompromising rejection of metaphysics and an equally strong interest in an *on*going reality, perceived and perceivable as *difference*." [22]

> Know better now. Unknow better now. Know only no out of. No knowing how know only no out of. . . No place but the one. None but the one whence none. Whence never once in. Somehow in. Beyondless. Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there. (*NO* 92)

The *un*knowing which the text seeks to bring into being, like absolute defiguration of language, is impossible ("Know nothing *no;*" "No future in this. *Alas yes,*" *NO* 91). The attempts to eliminate knowledge, the known from words, bring about a self-renewing *linear* narrative, an onward direction of writing beginning again and again, circling the value of progressive approximations ("Fail again. Fail *better*"). The linguistic re-*present*ation of a space that would be merely "there," with the exclusion of all allusions, suggestions of direction must proceed through a "backward" movement in language ("Back is on. Somehow on. . . *Back for somehow on,*" 109), through a progress of stripping "place" of narrative, of movement "in"/ "out of." However, space can only be defined in its relations, through movement: the hypothesized space of stasis re-enacts – in the very elimination of directions, in the

22. Locatelli, p. 241.

act of reduction – what it is seeking to void itself of: that "*thence*less *thither*less there." The suppression of progress becomes a linear, progressive narrative through excellence about the very impossibility of such suppression. The text shows how *voided* words, terms act as figurations that come closest to accommodating the void; however, since the void cannot be represented, these terms show the *presence* of something that by definition negates the qualities pertaining to the void. The text thus turns into a negative way of pointing at the void, while itself being the sum of traces, residua of this void which cannot be represented: "It is as though the text can only retain a series of signifiers which have strayed from conventional usage. These terms themselves have been voided, in place of the unavoidable scene described. In other words, this text's attempt to describe nothing generates, in spite of its primary intention, *precisely this text*."[23]

Beckett's late prose, especially the *Stirrings Still* and *Nohow On* trilogies, seem to fly in the face of representation, working against the nature of "normal" language use by taking issue with, and disrupting, linguistic expectations and expectations pertaining to "literariness": stable reference, figuration, allusion. In so doing, these texts radically foreignize language, making it visible *as* language/enunciation. Strangely, the effect of the rigorous reductions/erasures is a peculiar excess of language: a semiosis where the signifier undergoes semantic, referential and thematic variation. Extreme paring down of language produces an epiphany of language based on the undoing of the distinction between linguistic figures of communicative phenomenon: the radically open, self-baring self-reflective text is (in) the event reading, even if the reading is not (in) the text.[24]

The event of communication/writing inscribed on the text could best be exemplified by the short piece *neither* (1976) which, by its indeterminacy both of genre and voice (routinely reproduced with short line breaks suggestive of poetry, was intended by the publisher John Calder to be included in the *Collected Poems* but for the resistance of Beckett, who considered it a prose work) stands for Beckett's writing on the threshold – between poetry and prose, between voices, between languages, between "impenetrable self" and "impenetrable unself" (ill), seeing and (mis)saying, in a state of perpetually delayed arrival:

> [*neither*]
>
> to and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow
> from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither

23. Renton, p. 175.
24. Cf. Locatelli, pp. 72–74, 266; Szafraniec, pp. 109–117.

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 (*CSP* 258)