

London Beckett Seminar 14 June 2000

Close reading of *Worstward Ho*

The group hurried slowly through the first page of Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1983), whose four paragraphs yielded rich material for discussion and speculation. The French translation was on hand for some interesting comparisons.

Paragraph One

'On' dominates, punctually monosyllabic yet endlessly suggestive. Echoes of Beckett himself, surely: paragraph four tells us, 'All of old. Nothing else ever', and it's hard not to hear the struggle of the unnamable being voiced again here. Perhaps a process of tidying up, tying loose ends, is at work: elements from earlier texts like the first (if there really is a second) Trilogy being gathered and carefully exhausted once and for all. Think of 'Mr Endon', too, his name a combination of end and (this) beginning.

But 'On' means much more too. Word number one, it sounds a little like the number of the book's first section ('one'), and like the French 'On' - as though positing a subject, perhaps, though that activity is precisely what's so problematic in the opening bars of this book. It's also 'No' backwards (*Nohow On?*), and reading backwards is the kind of activity that the seminar's sort of collective close attention seems to encourage. A negative backwards, then, a positive (and the multiplication of negatives by positives will be one way of talking about the action of the early pages), an assertion: 'On'. Something has been switched on: a lever has been thrown from one position to another. 'On' is perhaps shorthand for the condition of existence rather than non-existence: in paragraph three it's 'On' that goes on 'in' a place, as though 'On' were the most primal way of talking about something like living, the smallest and most ineradicable unit of (the language of) being.

Other connotations. 'On' is spatial: are we on some surface or other (and if not there, where?). And it carries, suggestively in the context of Beckett's career, a hint of theatre: 'You're on'. The stage is set, then, and someone or something is perhaps on it. The French opens '*Encore*', which has its own theatrical associations.

'On. Say on': say, on - that's to say (and this, we found, is hard to say), something like 'for instance, on'; 'say, on, though not necessarily that'. 'Say' makes provisional, fictional (and this page, we came to think, might be in part an allegory of fiction as such). Perhaps 'say' also makes the 'on' discursive, makes this existence an essentially linguistic one (which may be another way of saying the same thing). 'Be said on': that seems to move one step away from subjectivity or agency, stripping who or whatever has been posited of its capacity to speak for itself: 'Be said' hints at those anti-humanist thematics of the world or subject being 'spoken by language', and thus further enfeebles whoever is at stake here before they've even managed to make an appearance. (What's it like to 'Be said on': to have saying poured, or perhaps vomited, all over you?) The French gives '*Soit dit encore*', which angles it two other ways. Firstly, 'Be said' becomes a command: 'So let it be said', the voice of the creator. But '*soit-dit*' also suggests 'so-called' (*soi-disant*), which again tends to undermine whatever kind of claim is close to getting made here.

'Somehow on' seems plain enough, but gets inverted in 'Till nohow on', the point of aporia perhaps. 'Some' versus 'no': the minute blocks of meaning are plus and minus again, working quasi-mathematically. 'Said nohow on' sounds like a repetition for emphasis ('I *said*, nohow on!'), but if 'Say' marks hypothesis and conjecture, then 'Say nohow' doubles the doubts.

Paragraph Two

This one deals with speech; indeed, it was pointed out that the first four paragraphs might be taken as statements of four Beckettian themes, the journey ('On'), speech ('Missaid'), the body ('Say a body') and time ('All of old'). 'Say for be said' suggests that a code is being formulated: from now on, 'say' will stand in for 'be said'. 'Say' is convenient, 'be said' more accurate - by the reading noted above, this could mean that the autonomous speech of a self will be supposed even though we know that the reality is more like a subject's being spoken by something and from somewhere else. But then a further qualifier: 'Missaid'. Nothing can even 'be said': 'Missaid' is the nearest to the real state of affairs, for everything that's said mars and backfires. That word dances a little: 'Miss aid'? To miss is to want, to lack, as well as to fail, to veer wide of the target. (Note, though, that 'mis' doesn't signal *total* failure, just partial error and inadequacy.) In any case, 'From now say for be missaid'. An 'on' - of all things - has gone missing here: wouldn't we say 'From now *on*, say...', with the ring of a proof correction? Perhaps 'on' is too loaded with semantic freight already, after the first paragraph, to be used in this way. And the lack of the word makes the sentence barer, more minimal still.

Paragraph Three

The longest and densest on the page. Positing is the action here: hypotheses of existence, the possibility of their reality or flowering closed off with meticulous negativity. 'Say a body': suppose, a body; is the tone musing here? (There's an issue, perhaps, of how to read the text aloud: slight variations can make a big difference.) 'Where none': be sure that you (or we) realize that there is no body, that the 'saying' isn't to be confused with actual positivity. 'No mind. Where none' is different, and the little difference seems deliberate and teasing: 'Where no no mind'; 'where no *absence* of a mind, say "no mind"'? In other words, a double negative: does it manage to be all the more relentlessly downbeat, or can it not avoid turning into a positive? (Could 'No mind' also carry a trace of 'Never mind', or even 'No matter', which turns up in paragraph four?) 'That at least' compounds the ambiguity: at least we have the accidental positive leaking from the preceding double negative? Or is the narrator, whatever that might be, congratulating itself on the achievement of absence: 'at least we've got it down to nothing'? 'At least' carries forward to the next line, gets shaded by 'A place'. To be '*At least*' is to be somewhere - at 'a place'? Imagine the place called 'Least': a station on the way to Worstward Ho? (The title does suggest a spatial, travelling scenario.) 'That at least' is also notable for its different tone, its closer approximation of colloquialism or even 'humanity': you could almost believe that 'someone' must be speaking here, and this kind of tonal incursion will crop up occasionally as the book goes on.

'A place. Where none'. A place where there is no place: the order of space is at once posited and cancelled. In a knotty contradiction, the place is denied by the phrase 'Where none' which itself seems to insist on some sort of spatiality - some sort of conception of places? 'For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still'. The place, which does not exist, is to be the location of the equally non-existent body. We're back to a kind of stage-setting: a scene is being established where being, action and movement might be played out, the curt stage directions of 'Move in. Out of. Back into'. But these possibilities are then denied, withdrawn as a wild excess of event and activity: 'No. No out. No back. Only in'. No coming or going, then: that fundamental Beckettian mode has been whittled down further to mere stasis, 'On in', carrying on in stillness, the continued existence of something somewhere. No more than that can be offered; less than that, in fact, given the qualifications already placed around the status of all this. Recall again the sense of this as a description of fictional practice, a delineation of what a narrative might do, and more notably here, what it will *not* do. 'Still' is another richly bare word. 'Still': stillness, calm, stasis; whether described or commanded. 'Still': continuation, the pursuit of something, going - on. ('Yet'.) 'Still': 'Still, I don't know - you *could* always say the opposite...'

Paragraph Four

'All of old. Nothing else ever'. What to do but enumerate old themes? And it's hard to avoid the echoes of the unnamable here, his last line magnified 10,000 years on: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'. It feels like a bit like classic Beckett, Beckett Gold, an appropriate extract for a cash-desk anthology: you read of actors who've pinned these phrases to their mirrors. The text has come to sound a tad trite, in other words: Steve Connor noted how it could be appropriated as a Kiplingesque exhortation. But the logic of failure is a little more complex than that: is to fail better to fail a little less, to succeed more (yet imperfectly), or is it to fail more completely, to perform still more dismally? Is the goal of repeated 'trying', in other words, 'success' (albeit one which will never quite come off) or 'failure' (whose completeness can be gradually improved)? The latter sounds more quintessentially Beckettian to us, but I don't know that the logic of 'success' can be shrugged away that easily. Not only would a successful (better - best?) failure be a success of some kind; more significantly, if failure were the goal, why would we need to 'Try again' when failure occurs, an occurrence met by the reassuring 'No matter'? It's surprisingly difficult, then, to get this sequence of imperatives, or descriptions, or whatever exactly they are, to be altogether committed to the negative: 'surprisingly', because this first page has been pretty wholehearted in its pursuit of lessness. The paradoxes surrounding successful failure will rumble on in the next session.

A couple of other points were raised in the seminar. One, what about the white spaces between paragraphs? If we're reading the text closely, how about the absence of text? Is that where thinking goes on? Two, the title: one or two of us feel that its naff pun sits uncomfortably with this exacting and forbidding book. Again, though, the next meeting of the seminar would feature a more lengthy discussion of this matter.

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