

## London Beckett Seminar 27 July 2000

### Worstward Ho (continued)

### General Notes on Language

The text defies the seamless continuity of traditional narratives, preferring sudden multiplication and division.

Despite the language of this text not stemming from a Latin origin, the way in which Beckett uses language seems Latinate because although the repetitive and reductive language may appear minimal and concise, the pared down language provides the text with ambiguities through its inflections and roots.

The language of this text seems tonally dead on the page (possibly like the *voix blanche* of his later plays). In reading the text aloud, however, it is impossible to keep the text toneless. Expression and emphasis is inherent in the work although where the stresses and emotion lie is ambiguous. The voice and text are, in effect, "coming alive" as the creatures, the one and the other do.

### "Where then but there see –"

The dash, which appears for the first time in the text, works to interrupt, stop or even perhaps protect the beings coming into shape from being seen by the reader. The word "see" perhaps is the incomplete "seen", interrupted and fragmented, suggesting, like many of Beckett's works, that there is an agony in being perceived and perceiving. Perhaps the agony arises in the inevitability of being "misseen" and thus misconceived as well as being the misseer.

The initial and subsequent dashes also suggest a new self-awareness and an increase in jumpiness. The voice becomes more self-conscious of its creation and stops itself to rewrite or re-imagine the image.

The disjunction between *to say* and *to see* could be understood in terms of Michel Foucault's *disvu* where he analyses the relationship between saying (which is arguably active) and seeing (which is arguably passive). Moreover, the "See" and "Say" function as indicatives without objects and imperatives. The structure of the text both states facts occurring as well as orders the readers *to see*, or *imagine* these facts. The voice becomes an authority of what is seen. In addition, the simple but ambiguous nature of the vocabulary leads to various interpretations.

**"Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there."**

This was defined as "no point of origin or destination but there". A clarification from an earlier discussion of this phrase.

**"First back turned the shade astand. In the dim void see first back turned the shade astand. Still."**

"First" may refer to 1) "first of all" or 2) "the first shade". The "back turned" may be read as 1) the shade turned back while astand or 2) if we turned back, would we see the shade astand.

"astand" is a stoic term. When used as a prefix, "a" means "not", "without" while when used as a preposition, "a" means "to", "towards" and "doing or being". We can understand "astand", then, as a grim triumph with a vein of self-mocking. The shade struggles and fails to stand mirroring the text's own struggle to become a text which is not a traditional narrative. The word "Still" works similarly. It calls to mind the frozen creation of the figure or the constipated creator unable to continue his text while simultaneously it conjures up the continual movement of the body created by words (the corpse) and the continual stirring within the text (corpus) coming into existence.

## **Dim Voids and Shadows**

The word "shade" can also be read as a ghost or shadow. The use of the word "shade" can possibly be read as the body as reduced, taken away, leaving us with only a trace, a corpse instead of a corpus.

The "dim void" was explored in great detail. It is perhaps both an indeterminate imperative and a fading down of the conception of a transcendental void. For Leibnitz, the void is an error in perception -- the misseen. Descartes draws a parallel between clarity and obscurity.

"Dimming" in this text appears as a continuous degradation or fading down. Beckett perhaps plays with the idea of progressive and regressive processes. In a sense, the text begins as a digital machine that begins with "On" and throughout attempts to turn itself bit by bit "Off".

**"Where then but there see now another. ..."**

The earlier interrupted "see --" both prepares the readers for what they will see in the next couple of paragraphs as well as stops the text which once again got away of itself. Trying to get the story right, the voice stops to slow down the process of creating. Although the old man and child seem to appear abruptly and suddenly, they, in fact, are constructed "Bit by bit". The text prepares the reader earlier with an image of "crippled" hands.

"Bit by bit", furthermore, suggests that the old man and child are becoming clearer as the text continues while simultaneously it could be read as an increasing fragmentation. They are increasingly falling to bits and pieces.

## **"Hand in hand with equal plod they go. ..."**

The old man and child holding hands bring up questions involving the seer and the seen. "Hold the old holding hand" is directed at the readers or the child. In other words, the reader is asked to imagine both the child holding the old hand and the old man's hand holding the child's.

In "Joined by held holding hands", the voice arrests the action in a similar way as "Still" does. While "held" and "joined" are in the past tense and thus suggests that the action has been completed, through the use of the gerund the hands are continually holding.

The text moves from a description of the hands holding (the bits) to the couple's movement: "Plod on as one. One shade. Another shade". The man and child are one unit as well as two distinctive ones. The two figures may even represent two stages / ages of the same man in the same spatial imagining. The word "old" thus not only refers to elderly, but also to former, the past, and that "same old hand".

To plod on, moreover, suggests a retarded, clown-like motion. Ironically, turning time into space, Beckett both creates the image of receding while his text states that the two figures "never recede". Whether the figures are either walking on the spot while receding in the narrator's memory or progressing and thus receding from the narrator's eye.

## **"Head sunk on crippled hands. Clenched staring eyes. At in the dim void shades. ..."**

The image of the head sunk and clenching eyes appear earlier in the text and have been discussed in detail at earlier meetings. This time around, we focussed our attention on "At in" as a grotesque grammatical construction. The prepositions seem to cancel each other out creating another dim void in the sentence. Are we supposed to read this passage as "the dim voidness which is all used up".

## **"They fade."**

In the following passage, the use the word "twain" is old English in its origin, and is used as a reversed Hegelian equation, it was decided. "Twain" both makes two into one and keeps them separate. References were made to both Beckett's essay on *Finnegans Wake* where he writes "Two most twain most" and King Lear's "If we can say it is the worst then it isn't" as a way in which the "twain" passage functions.

This passage, moreover, begins with a definite indicative: "They fade." The old man and child are departing and thus going further from the eye of the voice. The readers can speculate that the quality of the image is diminishing. Moreover, because fade is a

theatrical term, we read the use of this word as describing the light as it fades until darkness envelops the stage.

Then while fading, the voice says that the figures "Sudden go. Sudden back." The eyes of the narrative / creating voice blinks, shutting out and bringing back or revealing the images seen. Perhaps, as we were, these eyes grew tired of its perception and imagining. At this point, the London Beckett Seminar suddenly saw an end to the meeting.

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