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Worstword Ho

"First the body. . . "

In comparison with the desiccated and disembodied self-cancellations which have characterised the text until this point, this section seems to offer a certain liveliness, as the body and the place are posited in terms which might allow sensations of the emotional and the ordinary into the bleached scene. But the self-cancellation remains: "First the body. No. First the place. No First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either." There is the semblance of logic here -- an exclusive logic of either/or and an inclusive logic of both/and -- although it becomes difficult to stabilize these terms sufficiently to allow for a logical progression. First "both" (the body and the place), then "either" (a decision is forced and either the body or place is posited), then the "other" is asserted (the body or the place, depending on which term is being occupied by the "either"). The seeming logic of alternation demands a choice of the reader, although it appears to be a strangely arbitrary choice in this world of fastidiously minimized specificities. Where one would expect "sick of the one try the other", one is given "[s]ick of the either" -- a move which both demands but also obscures the choice of the body or the place. Either is perhaps retained also because it bares the trace of "ether".

Being sick, or sick of something, is strangely colloquial and, as such, indicates a semblance of movement and a directional effect, despite the fact that all here is still subject to eternal recurrence and rendered in the subjunctive. There are, of course, many emetic moments in Beckett's work (see *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1963) p.43: "then life begins to ram her fish and chips down your gullet until you puke, and then you puke down your gullet until you puke, and then you puke down your gullet until you puke the puke, and then the puked puke until you begin to like it", or the logorrhoea of *The Unnamable* in which expression is linked with vomiting). Here, though, as things and bodies begin to pile up in the denuded scene (reminiscent of the descriptions of the cylinders?), rather than figuring the inability to stop expressing (see the *Trilogy*), there is a sense that vomiting becomes the attempt to separate out, to expel and have done finally with the body and the place. Unexpectedly, there is the possibility that here one could be "sick for good. Throw up for good". There might be a link to be fashioned, then, between such vomiting and the fact that Beckett's analyst, Wilfred Bion, associated bodily expulsion with a paranoid schizophrenic phase in which there is a compulsive desire to expel and keep things separate. But "Throw up and go" could be a command rather than an event, making this a representation of dry retching rather than an achievement. Is it also possible that such vomiting and violently unwilling expulsion could be linked with creation myths (see Saturn consuming his children and the birth of Athena)?

From the vomiting body, imagined and realised, we are moved on to "[t]he place again". As in *Company* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the cessations and subsequent resummptions of representation, of places and bodies, assume the dynamic of a slide show, as events are punctured and punctuated by undescribed and indescribable durations. Again, one is reminded of the scenes in the cylinders, but it is as though the

strange yet still recognisable action that occurs there has been exorbitantly accelerated or slowed, abstracted and paled down, until only the barest movement of representation and denial takes place.

"Better again. Or better worse". This is the beginning of those complex and endlessly inverting economies of best and worst which characterise *Worstward Ho*. "Better" and "worse" also become uncertain terms here because each can equally be read as a noun, adjective or verb. In "Still worse again", there is the gnawing suspicion of the uncontrollable increase latent within repetition, inexorably manifested in this persistent attempt to say the worst; whilst, characteristically for Beckett, "still" also retains the sense of cessation and persistent increase – that which is even worse again. Of course, only language enables the representation of negativity, but the text reminds us that even such linguistic negation can never be absolute, because a negative will always have to be posited. "Go for good", with its trace of an ironic "go for gold", introduces a surprising new register of positivity into the text, but "for good" will later become "[g]ood and all" – a positivity that remains paradoxical in its representation of an ultimate termination.

"Worstword Ho"

Is the late trilogy (*Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstward Ho*) really a trilogy, in any sustained sense? Yes and no. *WH* certainly seems spartan after the cabin, the buttonhooks, chairs, curtains, keys, skylights, chests, stones, lambs, and greatcoats of *ISIS*; but there are connections to be made (see our later remarks on the primary pressure in *C* and the final words of *ISIS*). As with all Beckett's texts, there is obsessive repetition – all is always the same, to a certain degree – but the tiny bifurcations of the narrative do seem to infect the texts with both a radical self-difference and a discrete distinction from one another.

The title of *Worstward Ho* seems rather uncharacteristic of the later Beckett, although, with masterful bathos, he rejects the exclamation mark of Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*, thus denuding the title of the possibility of asserting the triumphant achievement of the worst. It might be tangentially interesting to note that the town of Westward Ho! in North Devon is constructed around a fiction, built after Kingsley's novel on the site where the imaginary action takes place ("The place again. Where none").

The fact that the west becomes the worst forms a neat inversion of the classical Christian representations of the discovery of Ireland as a place of salvation, whilst also undercutting the Celtic myth of Oisín's travels to the magical realm of Tir na nÓg which supposedly lay under the sea to the west of Ireland. Westwards moves against the rotation of the earth and also against the left to right direction of writing. This writing, then, whose intention is to work to the worst/west, might be thought of as a form of "writing under erasure" (See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976)). Colloquially, to "go west" is also to meet with disaster.

"It stands. . ."

"It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands." Here, there is a certain rash positivity, although "say" maintains the double sense of assertion and an awareness of contingency, in the sense that what is being suggested is possible but not certain. To achieve this reckless and casually positive standing, the story of the pain and the bones in which the pain is felt needs to be constructed. The bones, perhaps reminiscent of "Echo's Bones", also require the ground in order to feel the pain ("ground" maintains a double sense of place and grinding) and thus such pain retains an echo of the that primary pressure on the body in *Company* ("To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts"). Disassembled bones would also seem to be related to various creation myths (re the creation of Eve). "Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain" might offer a straight or ironic Cartesianism in which no nerves are needed to connect bones or body to mind; indeed, "Somehow up and stand" also suggests that there is little connection between bones and mind, but also offers up the possibility that the action is effected by some exterior will. The casual phrase "It stands" is not allowed to remain so, as it leads to an excessive multiplying of details. Such a stirring of detail and effect submits the characteristic desire to control the narrative, to count everything out and everything back (as with Molloy's sucking stones), to a radical failure. Such failure, such exorbitant detail, leads inevitably to an instance of narrative asymmetry within this careful process of assertion and negation. As in Watt's strange method of walking (see *Watt* p. 28), it might be possible that the flailing of arms and legs would not lead to progression and that the simple process of back and forth, come and go, might deny forward motion; but just as any tiny asymmetry might start a movement in one direction for Watt (see Lucretius' concept that all life begins with the tiniest movement of inclination as elucidated by Michel Serres in his reading of the *clinamen* of Lucretius. Similarly, here, the trek forwards towards the best/worst will begin again as the balance of the narrative is constantly tipped, counter balanced and, in so doing, tipped again.

"All of old. . ."

"All of old" seems to contradict the final sentence of the previous section: "Change of"; however, there has indeed been a progression, for it is as "of old", but "never so failed". Indeed, there is now a marked difference in tone from section four which also began with "[a]ll of old", but was so emptily prospective. Here there is a sense that, "[w]ith care", the project of failing or worsening might come to fruition, although, within *Worstward Ho*, this could be both for the better and for the worse. The complex economies of best and worst seem reminiscent of Freud's thesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which the death drive propels the living organism towards the desire for an absolute termination, a death that will be complete; but because death cannot be immediate, life undertakes a complex series of detours so that the act of final subtraction will become an enormous and radical lessening, all the more complete for the complexity which it has snuffed out. Here, then, Beckett allows things to happen so that something worse can take place – a narrative strategy that might enable a dying that will be totally successful and fully completed (for an elaboration of the relationship between *WH* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* see Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

"With care" marks another insertion of an ordinary voice into this radically minimized discourse. One is reminded of Beckett's injunctions to translators that they must dampen down the resonances in search of a discursive neutrality; but here, he himself seems to insert such colloquialisms into the text in order to create a tension between imaginative proliferations and the narrative demands of lessening and worsening. A similar moment occurs in the previous section, as the phrase "if needs must" becomes both ordinary and startling opaque and self-recursive. The tautology of "needs must" demands we imagine a structure of recursive obligation, where needs would, in turn, have demands placed upon them. The word "must" itself retains the sense of demand and action (must and mustering) and of dusty stasis (musty).

The text seems radically unbound; it lacks main verbs and stable tenses. In "With care never worse failed", "with care" might imply a turn to the future; but as "failed" becomes a transitive verb, if this is the future, it is one subject to the demand that the narrative is failed, ruined -- a future that is thus denuded of contingency and might only be glimpsed through the future perfect. These tenses are, of course, implied rather than stated.

"Dim light source unknown. . ."

"Dim light source unknown" seems to return us, momentarily, to the diegetic scene of *The Lost Ones* and the other cylinder pieces.

To "[k]now minimum" is, again, slightly worse/better than the absolute positivity/negativity of knowing nothing. Reminiscent of the final words of *ISIS*, "Know happiness", there is an obvious play on knowledge and negativity -- know/no - - and thus, by inference, on the earlier inversions of no/on. Such a narrative device revisits the inversions that take place in *Watt*.

When reading a phrase such as "Know nothing no", one is obliged, lacking all instruction, to arrange and substitute possible subjects, objects and verbs in order to give the text the semblance of sense. Again, as commented upon earlier, this is a strangely gratuitous and arbitrary demand, considering the careful paring down to which the text is submitted. Surprisingly, there is also a strangely alliterative musicality in "Meremost minimum" (the French translation makes even more of these syllabic repetitions).

Working with a complex economy of comparatives and superlatives, Beckett again collocates negativity and positivity. Of course, linguistically and mathematically, two negatives can, in conjunction, create a positive; here, then, the desired incremental effect of sustained negation will require that any negative must be followed by a trace of positivity, just as that positivity must then, in turn, be negated.

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