

## London Beckett Seminar 29 May 2001

### Worstward Ho Notes:

#### On. Stare on ...

Could the phrase "Be on" be related to Beckett's analyst, Wilfred Bion? It seems also to be tautological, in a sense, as "on" is the Greek for being. "Be on" could be a statement, but if it could also be a command, then it becomes suggestive of other demands to "Be off" or "Be gone". As these textual squiggles attain a certain minimized liveliness, the phantasmal possibilities that constellate around such phrases become reminiscent of the construction of phantom or spectral bodies and limbs that occur within the drama (most famously within *Not I*).

"Somehow on" and "Anyhow on" – what's the difference? "Somehow" seems more limiting, more defined; "anyhow" contains the trace of a shrug.

"For poor best worse and all" seems almost algebraic in its compound form and progression through linear accretion. This maddeningly logical working through of certain linguistic elements becomes the aesthetic equivalent of an obsessive compulsion, or perhaps the grammatical equivalent of Molloy's ritual of sucking stones.

A discussion of the phrase/title "Nowhow on" brought up the suggestion that "nowhow" might have appeared in *Alice in Wonderland* (when Alice talks to Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee). It is also nicely homonymic with the blandly casual "know-how".

#### Dim whence unknown ...

Why "At all costs unknown"? What are the strange and unknowable stakes and risks in this economy of worsening better?

As a little dark relief, we are now given a pipe in the void and in the dim. Not a sound, of course, but a sealed tube, obviously reminiscent of the cylinders of the earlier short prose. Like the earlier "grot" in the void, the pipe offers the possibility of a change in the dim void and thus the possibility of some sort of measurement, but the text is careful to note that the dim is equivalent or "selfsame" both within and without. This would be a logical impossibility if the dim is lit, albeit dimly, from an exterior source. Indeed, one would expect the interior of the pipe to be dimmer than the exterior if it is sealed, unless, of course, the tube is only sealed at one end or is permeable in some other way. It seems most likely, though, that this "Old dim" does not obey any conventional rules of lighting. These equal dims seem to model something like a completely inert system where there is no transference of energy and thus the impossibility of movement or measure. Perhaps it is like one of Descartes' thought experiments, reminiscent of other little conundrums in Beckett's work such as "Murphy's mind excluded nothing that it did not already contain". The pipe, which

becomes a fold in this text that seems to want everything to be flat, unhidden, emptied out and exposed, might then be another way to measure the quality of its extension.

"Far and wide" has appeared earlier in reference to the staring eyes (eyes that recall *Rockaby*). The dim is a quality of what is to be seen, but it is also a quality of seeing.

"Worsen that?" Does this question indicate the possibility that this scene might be worsened or is it the incredulous response to an external injunction to make it worse?

### **Next the so-said void ...**

These hyphens are new but the "narrow field" has appeared earlier, although it seemed to relate more specifically to the eyes and thus to vision. This field could be the semantic field, but it might also retain some Dantean resonances, for we are told that it is "Rife with shades". These shades might be shadows, although the text asserts earlier that there are no shadows here. It seems more likely, though, that the shades are, as they have been before, the "twain" and the one who is observing this scene. However, the word "rife" then seems rather strong, with its suggestion of a teeming throng.

"Well so-missaid" becomes a typical complication of the assertion "Well said".

The phrase "shade-ridden" suggests a void that is both over-populated with shades and one that is in the process of lessening its quota in that it might be ridd(en)ing itself of these spectral figures.

Why does *Worstward Ho* prefer the formulation of missaying to ill saying? Ill saying has already been attended to in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, but it is difficult to know whether missaying is an intensification of wilful intent or a weakening. But perhaps ill saying (mal dire) contains a trace of maudire (to curse) whereas missaying appears to be rather more contingent and accidental.

### **Add others ...**

The text does not appear to want to add others; it asserts that it never will, but then retracts this certainty to suggest that others might be necessary in order for the lessening and worsening to continue. We thus seem to be back in the familiar territory of that other final part of a trilogy, *The Unnamable*.

The text's humorous use of the idiomatic in the phrase "Till if needs must" seems to defamiliarize the cliché, taking its strangely tautologous logic as its own. Christopher Ricks makes much of this tendency in Beckett's work in *Beckett's Dying Words*. This resurrected cliché works through a complex relationship between volition and necessity that belongs very squarely to this text (in this sense, it is also reminiscent of the earlier phrase "At all costs"). But where does the necessity come from? Is there an outside?

The possibility that others will appear suggests that there is something that does not want the dim to go. But it will go, "Till dim go. At long last go", and what we have

here is only its foreshadowing, maybe something like a diminuendo that comes before rather than after the main attraction.

Notes by Laura Salisbury.