

The Weaving of Penelope's Tapestry: Genre in the Works of Samuel Beckett

J. E. Dearlove

I. Introduction

When it was first conceived, this paper was going to be about Beckett and the breakdown of genre. It seemed to me, at that time, intuitively obvious that Beckett was breaking down genres, blurring the borders between literary types, and fabricating new forms with names like “residua” and “texts.” As I pursued my subject, however, a great deal changed. For one thing, I began to realize that there is no universally accepted definition of genre. As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* rather metaphorically phrases it: “... the field is littered with the ruins of past definitions which have convinced no one save their author, and the advance of modern writing is so vast and multifarious that all classifications crumble in front of it.”¹

Therefore, my first task in writing about Beckett and the breakdown of genre, is to tell you what I think it is that is reportedly being broken down. In this paper, genre refers simply to a collection of expectations a reader holds about a work. These expectations are based in part upon the reader's previous literary experiences, including experiences with other works by the same author.

My second task is to confess to you that I no longer believe that Beckett is breaking down genre. Instead, I am convinced that his works are dependent upon the reader's perception of genre. We must know what a detective novel is, in order to understand what *Mercier and Camier* denies us; what a novel of ideas implies, in order to appreciate the exaggerated claims of *Murphy*, what a novel of manners should do, in order to recognize the omissions of *The Lost Ones*. Instead of breaking down structures, Beckett deliberately evokes them. He raises our expectations and then consciously thwarts them. The result is a carefully balanced and manipulated ambiguity.

Instead of the breakdown of structures, a far more appropriate image for Beckett's use of genre is suggested by Homer's Penelope who thwarted her would-be suitors during Odysseus' absence by promising to remarry once she had completed a tapestry. Patiently weaving by day and faithfully unweaving by night, Penelope never finishes her tapestry. This unending process of weaving and unweaving is the same process Beckett employs. But, for Beckett the process is complicated by the fact that his works have begun to create their own set of generic expectations. When we read a work by Beckett, we do not expect to find traditional plots, conventional characters, or recognizable locations. Instead, we anticipate unidentified voices and nameless, shapeless, and sexless figures. We know that time will be an eternal present lacking any memory of the past and denied any hope for the future. Certainty will be replaced by a pervasive ambiguity. Language will be stripped of allusions and punctuation. Meaning will have to be gleaned from repetitions, revisions, and contradictions. Beckett's works have become a genre of their own and it, like all the other genres, must be woven and unwoven. The danger in such a self-reflexive process is that it may become its own subject, obscuring the threads and patterns of Beckett's evolving tapestries. I would like to turn now to one of Beckett's recent pieces, *Worstward Ho*,² because I believe it is the

closest Beckett has ever come to explicating his process and because it reflects the tensions of a self-reflexive genre.

II. Weaving and Unweaving *Worstward Ho*

Everything in *Worstward Ho* both demonstrates and is about the weaving and unweaving process. The work depicts a voice saying words that it hopes will unsay themselves. The situation is familiar. Although *Worstward Ho* lacks the sense of urgency and volition which drives the Unnamable to seek the words that will put an end to words, nonetheless the piece does attempt to go beyond language and embrace the “Unmoreable unlesstable unworseable evermost almost void” (p. 43). The effort is paradoxical. The more the voice describes the desired goal (i.e., the void), the further it is from achieving it. The piece needs to unmake itself; needs to find words that will gesture to what it must be like when words are gone:

What when words gone? ... What words for what then? None for what then. No words for what when words gone. For what when nohow on. Somehow nohow on. (p. 29)

Worstward Ho goes somehow nohow on by manipulating three “shades” (or figures) and one or more voices. The shades are an old woman kneeling, an old man and a child walking hand in hand, and ahead sunk on crippled hands staring with “clenched” eyes at the other shades. In addition to being a shade, the head is also the “Seat of all. Germ of all” (pp. 10 and 19): the “Scene and seer of it all’ (p.24). In other words, the head is the container within which all of *Worstward Ho* transpires. As such, it is also the setting, the “Beyondless... Thenceless thitherless there” (p. 12) In earlier works Beckett explores the infinite regression implied by such a self-containing container, but here he is content to acknowledge the problem and leave it unresolved:

... the head said seat of all. Germ of all. All? If of all of it too. where if not there it too? There in the sunken head the sunken head.... Shade with the other shades. In the same dim. The same narrow void. Before the staring eyes. Where it too if not there too? Ask not. No. Ask in vain. Better worse so. (p.19)

The head sees and thus creates everything including itself. We have Berkeley’s dictum, “to be is to be seen,” operating in an hermetically sealed system. Whereas everything within the head can fade, change, or disappear, the head itself cannot disappear until there is an end to the dim. (“The head. Ask not if it can go. Say no. Unasking no. It cannot go. Save dim go. Then all go” p. 19-20). Because the head contains everything, the dim must refer to an internal not an external illumination. In essence, the dim which drives everything must be the imagination. As long as there is imagination, there will be words (voices) and images (shades to fill the void). The quest therefore is impossible: one cannot imagine the absence of imagination. At best, Beckett can only hope to present an image that will imply its own dissipation and ultimate absence.

The quest for a self-dissipating image informs every aspect of *Worstward Ho* from the title and structure to the language. Beckett presents something with one hand (or voice) while taking it away with another. Perhaps the most obvious example of this process is the title which negates the

allusions it evokes. Instead of the wagon-masters call (Westward Ho) to start pioneers in their westward journey to adventure and a new and better life, we have a linguistic game being played with that call. We are directed not to a geographical direction, but to a comparative state: not to the west and adventure, but to an abstraction which is usually negative. We are thrust into a mental journey that reverses our expectations, having us seek not the best, but the worst. And, as the pun on “ward” and “word” implies, in true Beckettian fashion, the journey will be a verbal one. Just as the title simultaneously elicits and negates an allusion, so too the entire structure of *Worstward Ho* calls forth and controverts expectations. The opening paragraph is a précis of the whole: “On. Say on. Be said on. Some how on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” (p.7). The piece begins with a clear and positive imperative, “On,” only to be undercut immediately by the less certain, “Say on.” Suddenly it is no longer clear if action actually takes place or if it is simply reported. The next sentence compounds the ambiguity by introducing the passive, “Be said on.” The volition and control implied by the imperative mood have disappeared. In their place now is confusion over who is speaking and to whom. The erosion of our initial confidence and clarity is momentarily stayed by the more positive, “*Somehow* on,” but this is itself instantly undermined by the introduction of a negative: “Till *nohow* on” (my emphasis). Finally, the whole is once again thrown into question by “Said nohow on.” Does all of this really end, or is it only said to have ended? Have we been presented with a summary as the act concludes and all has been said? Or, is it irrelevant that an end was hypothesized? Do you go “on” despite claims that all has been said?

The contrapuntal movement of the first paragraph is replicated throughout the work. For example, the first several paragraphs are orchestrated into an antiphony between a voice that is postulating our “story” and one that self-consciously questions and criticizes that “story.” Paragraph one postulates “On. Say on,” while paragraph two criticizes the language that made that postulation. Paragraph three introduces a body, a mind, and a place, while paragraph four dismisses them all as old stuff: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried.” (p. 7). What one voice offers, the other takes away.

The same undermining process is applied to the “shades.” In another characteristic pattern, Beckett begins describing the figures *in media res*. The solitary figure which Beckett later labels “one” (p. 20), is presented to us without warning, explanation, or even antecedent: “*It* stands” (my emphasis, p. 8). Slowly Beckett adds other details until the shade becomes identifiable, calling it a body (p. 11), saying its back is turned (p. 12), providing it with a hat and greatcoat (p. 14). As soon as we are able to visualize “one,” however, Beckett begins to undermine the image by revising what has gone before (e.g., by page 14 “one” is kneeling not standing) and by eliminating attributes. Hat, greatcoat, and even portions of the body (p. 22) are stripped away. The same pattern is repeated for the other shades. Once we have pieced together the image of “two” as an old, white-haired man and a fair-haired child walking hand in hand and wearing greatcoats and boots, Beckett removes their boots, ends the hand-holding, and ultimately suggests that they are themselves gone (“Say child gone. As good as gone.... Say old man gone” p. 43).

Similarly, the language in *Worstward Ho* parallels the themes of the impossible worst-ward journey. In fact, most of the verbal difficulties and games of the work are linguistic complements to its paradoxical quest. In an inversion of traditional values, worseness and lessness become desirable because they put us close to the void. Hence we end up with oxymoronic phrases such as “Unknow better” (p. 11), “Better worse kneeling” (p. 15), and “Any other would do as ill” (p. 14).

Language is further undermined by revision and contradiction. The voice reverses all that has been and will be said when it announces that “say” should be interpreted as “be missaid” (p. 7), “see” as “be misseen” (p. 12), and “said” as “missaid” (p. 37). Statements no longer mean what they appear to say, nor belong to the tense in which they are written. The use of the passive in this work further disorients the reader, blurring the boundaries between “scene and seer” (p. 24), speaker and spoken. It is unclear when one stops acting and starts being acted upon, when one is holding a hand and when one is being held (p. 13), when you are saying a story, and when you are being said.

III. The Self-Reflexive Tapestry

Not only does *Worstward Ho* dramatize in its language and structures the weaving and unweaving process lying at the center of its impossible quest, but it also self-consciously explicates that process. The work openly admits that it is always striving to reach the void, to eliminate everything including itself (p. 42). The voice acknowledges that words are added only if they can help diminish what they describe (p. 25). The goal is consistently to lessen or worsen the eyes (p. 27), the shades (p. 21), the dim (pp. 24-25), even the words themselves (p. 21). Whereas the reader may have to spend hours piecing out meaning from the torturously clipped sentences of *Worstward Ho*, the voice laments their excess of meaning and lack of inanity (p.21). Whereas other Beckett characters suffer the anguish of an unremitting present, the voice bemoans the possibility of a future: “No future in this. Alas yes” (p. 10)—Alas there may be a future and not an ending. The voice freely confesses that its purpose is “Next try fail better...” (p. 22). Notice that here Beckett has reversed the rather Romantic celebration of artistic failure he enunciated in the “Three Dialogues” saying: “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail.”³ We no longer see an artist who, wanting to succeed but knowing he won’t because of “the incoercible absence of relation,”⁴ nonetheless dares to fail. Instead we hear a voice that tells us it would like to fall but unwillingly keeps “succeeding” in creating images and words that it must then somehow undermine.

The voice also self-consciously admits that the words, images, and undermining are themselves not new: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (p.7). Indeed, *Worstward Ho* reverberates with echoes of Beckett’s earlier pieces. From the opening scene which is reminiscent of the Unnamable’s need to go on despite the impossibility of going on, to specific details like the hats and greatcoats and bootlessness, we recognize Beckettian situations, images, and techniques. Even the verbal games are familiar. The phrase “Something not wrong...” (p. 21) is a deliberate evocation and negation of the refrain from *How It Is*: “something wrong there.” But where *How It Is* employs the phrase to emphasize the narrator’s mistakes, here the phrase really laments the voice’s inability to make mistakes, to be wrong, to dwindle away. By evoking and altering earlier works, *Worstward Ho* becomes a self-conscious commentary on Beckett’s canon. The piece attempts to get closer to the void by paring away and flattening out even the minimal emotions the other pieces intimated. The Unnamable’s situation is repeated, but not its urgency. *Enough*’s sufficiency is briefly implied (p. 43), but never developed. *Company*’s nostalgic loneliness and desire for companionship are present, but only in the no longer held hands of the couple. As a result, *Worstward Ho* is more barren and stark than other pieces. Even its verbal games participate less in Krapp’s sheer joy in the sound of the word “spool,” than in the dianoetic laughter hypothesized by Watt.

Perhaps the starkness of *Worstward Ho* is best illustrated in the ending which is one of Beckett's most contrived and least resonant endings. As in a musical composition, there are several structural hints that the end is coming. Beckett alters the pacing and rhythm of the piece by first slowing things down through extended paragraphs (pp. 43-44) and then speeding them up with several abrupt passages in which the voice jumps rapidly from one dissipating image to another as they fade, change, and disappear (pp. 44-45). Beckett gives *Worstward Ho* a sense of formal completion by making it circular. The final paragraph returns us to the first, repeating the sentence "Said nohow on." Beckett even hints at a plot-like conclusion by comparing the kneeling woman to stooping gravestones:

Nothing and yet a woman. Old and yet old. On unseen knees. Stooped as loving memory some old gravestones stoop. In that old graveyard. Names gone and when to when. Stoop mute over the graves of none. (p. 46)

In this passage there is, however briefly and ephemerally, a suggestion of a story, or at least of a connection among the shades and voices. The clenched eyes maybe remembering the shades of those who no longer exist—an old man, a child, and a grieving woman. Rest will come for the eyes only when they stop recalling those shades and merge like them into the void. Such a disappearance would provide a neat unity of form and content similar to the unities that so compellingly end works like *The Unnamable*, *Enough*, and *Company*. Structurally, the end of *Worstward Ho* is well-established. Thematically, however, the piece could end anywhere: whenever the imagination stops, so do the words. And emotionally, the piece could have no satisfactory conclusion precisely because Beckett has pared away emotions and feelings. The self-reflexive work can go on ad infinitum creating and negating itself. Whereas Penelope is saved from an eternity at the loom by Odysseus' return, there is nothing to spare *Worstward Ho* from its own weaving and unweaving.

IV. Said nohow on

In talking of *Worstward Ho*, Beckett once remarked that it put the kabosh on things and that he had done it to himself.⁵ Although none of us takes very seriously any suggestions, even Beckett's, that he has written himself into a corner, the tensions and starkness of *Worstward Ho* demonstrate the difficulties inherent in Beckett's treatment of genre. Beckett is able to gesture to an unimaginable, unnamable void by controlling our expectations. He carefully evokes and undermines literary conventions. But the more we read Beckett, the more his process becomes itself an expected literary convention. *Worstward Ho* self-consciously explicates Beckett's process and his dilemma, ending with the rather pessimistic "Said nohow on." My expectation and hope now are that from this seemingly impossible situation Beckett will find yet another way to weave and unweave the tapestry of his art.

NOTES

1. Alex Preminger, et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Enlarged Edition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.308.

2. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1983).
3. Samuel Beckett, "Three Dialogues," quoted in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 21.
4. "Three Dialogues," p. 21.
5. Beckett made these remarks in a conversation with Martha Fehsenfeld on July 1, 1983.