“Till nohow on”:
The Later Metafiction of Samuel Beckett

Accrochez-vous à votre désespoir et chantez-nous ça.
— Samuel Beckett

Every great writer has one central obsession, one image which contains the core of his artistic enterprise—acting in Shakespeare, remembering in Proust, paring down a story in Samuel Beckett. The later works of Beckett take us closer to what he called “the ideal core of the onion,” that imaginary goal for a writer who writes in an “excavatory” way: Beckett becomes more and more like himself in these late writings. Maybe in the process he becomes unreadable for most people. Not, however, for those who appreciate him not just as one writer among others, but as Samuel Beckett, the bearer of his unique vision. Those readers will appreciate these short narratives, and agree with their author when he says, “No future in this. Alas yes” (WH 103). They will certainly enjoy the humour—Beckett does not lose his humour in his later phase, though it certainly becomes more individual, more intrinsic to the thematics of his writing. Think just of the titles—Worstward Ho, a parody of Charles Kingsley’s Westward Ho! and a good-humoured jibe at Beckett’s own “aesthetic of failure,” or Stirrings Still, a perfectly oxymoronic title for the parting work of a minimalist storyteller.
Samuel Beckett's late work is quite rightly often described as minimalist—implying a complete reduction both in the size of his stories and in the significance of the anecdotal element, story or plot. This is certainly correct, and the whole evolution of his work, beginning with the early abundance and wordiness of More Pricks than Kicks or Murphy, is reproduced in a reduced version in the writings of his last phase, from Company (1980) to his death in 1989. Company came as a bit of a surprise, since it is a "long" text by the later Beckett's standards (89 pages in the original edition), the longest text since How It Is (1961). There followed a somewhat shorter story, Ill Seen Ill Said, first published in French in 1981 and then translated by the author, and in 1983 Worstward Ho appeared, which has the size of a long short story but is much more dense and abstract. Stirrings Still, published in 1988, is even shorter, and returns to a more conventionally narrative mode—more conventional by Beckett's standards. These works have several characteristics in common: a mood of nostalgia and meditation, a concern with their own development and with their endings, and an intense self-consciousness about their own status as images which are evoked by a solitary creative mind. In all of them we find a creative mind shaping images or narratives, until they are discarded as false consolations; the texts end with the mind confronting minimal being, solitude, and its own impending extinction.¹

A concern with death, and a concern with their own closure characterises these texts. Clearly, these concerns are one and the same. This subject is not new in Beckett's writings: it plays an important part in The Unnamable, where the narrator longs for the phrase that will dispose of him, and bring the book to an end. The Unnamable is a paper creature, and his only being is in the words that make him up. It is easy to see how death is associated with narrative closure here. The symbolic universe of this work as well as that of the more recent texts is organized around a few polar images associated with the opposites speech/silence. Speech is life, and silence is death. Speech is also light—following a tradition which goes back at least as far as St John's

Gospel—and darkness, therefore, is associated with death and silence. Speech is light because it allows representation, it pictures objects and characters, builds up narratives, takes the speaking subject beyond itself, establishes a link between the narrator and the world. Objects can only be pictured in the light. Therefore, the murmuring voice of Company or Worstward Ho is accompanied by a faint light.

There is on the one hand the narrative voice, and there is on the other hand the silence which will engulf it. This opposition is absolute. But within the area illuminated by the voice, there are clearer and darker regions. The light would seem to be like a torchlight, because it illuminates the object while it leaves its bearer, the narrator, in comparative darkness. The narrative voice is conscious of this, and the reluctance to self-representation is justified, discussed and thematised. The narrator is, according to Company, the one who can never say "I", only "he". Still, the presence of an "I" who gives shape to the stories is felt everywhere.

Gérard Genette once formalized the poetics of narrative intrusion with a half-serious formula which went something like this: narrative + narrator = C (constant).² That is, if we consider the text as a story which is told plus the telling of the story, then a reduction of one of these two elements amounts to an increase of the other. I don’t know whether this formula is correct, but it certainly is an adequate description of the evolution of Beckett's prose. Beckett's early novels were "impure" in the sense that a large part of them was devoted to traditional storycraft: some kind of plot, characters with conflicting desires, events, elements introduced for the sheer pleasure of narration. Beckett's particular purification or ascesis consists in bringing to bear most of the narrative interest on the how and not on the what, on the narrating process, its occasion, its modes, its purpose, instead of the fictional world. This is the source of all the metafictional, reflexive elements we find in his work since Watt. Even the problems he faces in effecting this reduction become a part of the finished work.³ It is

¹ Actually, the series might well begin with "For to End Yet Again" (1975) or even some of the earlier "tinsies" like "Ahr a Bird" (see John Pilling, "Eine Kritik der Ahr: Schlesicht Geschichte Schlesicht Gesang" 309; Paolo Zacarini, "L'infitto racconto di Samuel Beckett").

² Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit", 187.

³ "The problems Beckett encounters in writing often become the subject of his writing" (S.E. Gontarski, quoted in Anthony Roche, "Beckett's Contexts", 73).
legitimate, then, to speak of "residual fiction" or "literature of impoverishment" in connection with his work; Beckett himself has used these terms, and suggested a figure symmetrically opposed to Joyce's by speaking of his own writing as "work in progress".4

Beckett's writing is dynamic in the sense that the texts, while they are finished wholes, represent in their development a process of composition: in any of these works, most brilliantly in Company and Ill Seen Ill Said, the fictional world is presented to the reader as it gradually issues from the creative mind, with drafts, corrections, interpretations, discarded alternatives—a narrative in the process of becoming, not a finished object with a stable being. The process of composition represented in the work need not be the actual process of composition which gave birth to the work in the first place—Beckett's texts are carefully chiselled and reworked, not ex abrupto improvisations. Of course, some traits of the original composing process may be retained in the structure of the work.5 But this is less significant than the fact that it is a represented composing process, a fictionalised composing process which has become part of the work's plot, so to speak. Any text, seen from the point of view of the reader, gradually defines its own structure as it is read: the reader sees that some discursive options are taken, others rejected; he identifies the genre and tone of the text, and so on. This process of construction is a consequence of the linear structure of discourse. It introduces a narrative development which is altogether independent from the represented story: it may have a suspense of its own—who is the narrator, for instance—and patterns of choice and action which are discursive rather than proairetic; for instance, will it be first or third person? Will this choice of form be maintained throughout the work? Beckett's texts incorporate this process into their structure: creating, reading and being become a single movement in them, and their end comes about as naturally as their progressive construction—through gradual and deliberate paring down. These works are meager enough as far as fabula, story or proairesis is concerned. The scenes they describe add up to a mood, not a plot.6 But the density of their discourse plot, their dynamics of enunciation, is unique even in very short texts like Stirrings Still.7 This complexity they achieve not through variety or through an abundance of narrative modes, but rather through a rich ambiguity.

I have mentioned how the late texts present not just images, but images being constructed and then dismantled. The basic image they present is precisely that of a mind constructing an image: they reflect on their own use of images. The image reaches the mind either directly as a conception (Worstward Ho), in the form of a scene seen by an eye (Ill Seen Ill Said) or as a voice heard in the dark (Company). These images are used as implements which accomplish essentially the same function, though they draw attention to different aspects of narrative, as sound, as description, or as pure imagination. The status of each of these elements (the voice, the eye, the mind) with respect to the image presented and to the implied author is a source of ambivalence and discussion: a basic meditation on the role of writing, which is at once an instance and a medium of representation, a means and an end in its own right.

For instance, in Company the basic situation is the following: somebody imagines somebody else who hears a voice in the dark. The situation is described, the relations between listener, voice and imaginer are discussed. Then we have the contents of the voice: it describes the same situation, and also introduces scenes and images relating to somebody's life. Now, who is who? Whose is the voice heard by the listener? Is the voice he hears the narrative voice we hear as reader? Whose life is told? The listener's? The imaginer's? The speaker's? Are they in the same darkness? And who imagines the imaginer? We are threatened with a regressus in infinitum, with second and third degree imaginers. This is a plot of discourse if there ever was one: the unravelling is, for once, clear, and also melancholy.

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4 Quoted in Frederik Smith, "Fiction as Composing Process: How It Is".

5 Cf. Smith, 16ff.

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6 Alberto Ruy Sánchez, "La nueva luna del planeta Beckett".

7 Beckett's writing is minimalist because he writes short texts, and definitely not in the sense that his writings are simple; his "minimal art" means an art of concept, of simple elements endlessly reworked (cf. Manfred Smuda, "Rust im Kopf: Becketts spätere Prosas und das Imaginäre", 213).
Words are coming to an end. With every single word a little nearer to the last. And... the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fable of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone. (C, 51-52)

This closure has an intensely personal tone, but... are we sure that it is just Beckett speaking, and that we are safely listening outside? We should know better after reading Company.⁸

The use Beckett makes of hearing suggests an area where reader and author meet. The author is also a listener, a listener to himself. According to Patrick Devret,

The quasi-mythical dimension of the writer’s solitude is the result of the acuity—given or gradually acquired, immo dereately developed—of his self-listening....

Solitude has always been his natural medium. He takes to writing as the mode of being closest to the truth of his ties to the world, such as he imagines they were at their purest moment, childhood.⁹

Company is an archetypal exploration of this unique relationship of the writer to the world, not least because the scenes from the past which are narrated by the voice, and which often reken similar scenes from previous works, are derived from Samuel Beckett’s own early life.¹⁰ Still, these stories come and go as pictures which might well belong to someone else’s life—in the way our own past sometimes feels like a fictional story which has little to do with our present situation. The final paragraphs of Company do away with the stories of the past and leave the mind brooding on the mystery of its solitary existence, cut off from the others and from itself.

The ending of Ill Seen Ill Said is an even more radical closure in the sense that it does away not only with the fictional world, but also with the fabulist, represented by the staring eye, and leaves us with a representation of the void, the death of the text, if only in a meta-linguistic way:

First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and biddle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breath that void. Know happiness. (ISIS, 97)

Adding and subtracting: that is, in essence, the plot of Ill Seen Ill Said, where the images themselves, routine scenes out of the life of an old solitary woman, are a symbol of the text’s precarious existence and its approaching end—“What but life ending. Hers. The other’s” (ISIS, 64).

But this fragility was “Mere bad. Way for worse.” (WH, 111). Worstward Ho goes furthest in reducing story and character to their barest expression, and in its reliance on the composing process as a source of narrative progress. Nothing “happens,” there is no story apart from the story of how a series of images are first evoked, then reduced (“Add a— Add? Never.”—WH, 111) and finally discarded. Some of these images are allusions to previous texts like Enough (the image of the old man and child walking together) or Ill Seen Ill Said (an old woman kneeling by the grave), and they are pure objects, functioning as the equivalent of the “story” in other texts. One of the images evoked has a different status, however: the image of the skull, the brain or the staring eyes. This is the subject which has evoked those other images, or the dim light, the language which allows them to be evoked. These are reflexive images, therefore, since they represent the bare minimum of the text, the words mentioning themselves. That is why these images cannot be erased like the others: “Dim can worsen. Somehow worsen.


⁹ “Ce qui donne à la solitude de l’écriture sa dimension quasi mythique tient d’abord à l’acuité—donnée ou peu à peu acquise, immédiatement développée—de son écoute de soi... La solitude est son élément depuis toujours. Il s’adonne à l’écriture comme au mode d’être le plus proche de la vérité de sa relation au monde, telle qu’il lui semble l’avoir vécue de la façon la plus pure au moment de l’enfance...” (“La solitude de l’écriture”, 58-59).

¹⁰ “Des images obsessionnelles”, according to Beckett himself (quoted in James Knowles, “Pour une vraie biographie de Beckett,” 650).
Go no. If not for good” (WH, 115). Therefore, the work concludes with a picture of minimal being which is an image of its own aesthetic project:


Said nohow on. (WH, 128)

The foundation of the textual structure is not a series of action verbs, but rather the attributive to be and the existential there to be, wrapped up in verbs expressing some kind of apperception. Beckett takes a bold course of action and then proceeds to suppress the verb to be most of the times it should appear; that is to say, in nearly every sentence. The text thrives on absolute reflexivity: “In the skull the skull alone to be seen” (WH, 114); “Longing that all go. Dim go. Void go. Longing go. Vain longing that vain longing go” (WH, 121). The theme of the work, as we see, is none other than its development and its impending end—Worstward Ho can be read as a symbol of the death drive described by Freud,11 couched here in purely narrative terms.

Among these late texts, Worstward Ho alone does not exist in a French version. The difficulties of translation will be enormous—for one thing, because of the text’s abundant use of alliteration: “To last unlessenable least how loath to leasten” (WH, 19), for another, because of its peculiar syntax—some people would no doubt argue it is not written in English anyway. Beckett employs an elliptical syntax that gradually teaches us how it should be read. Sentences like the following do not make much sense initially:


In order to understand them we must read them in their context, having grasped the work’s syntactic habits, such as the suppression of the verb to be and the peculiar use of nominalization and word formation. We must also be familiar with the theme implied in the title, one which is dear to Beckett: the search for the ineffable through an aesthetic of reduction and failure, represented here by the reduction of the central image to a minimum, to a “worse”. The title then means something like this: the barest minimum of representation is the best way of enacting the ascetical aesthetics of this text, that is, of evoking nothingness through language—although this whole aesthetic project is self-contradictory and doomed to failure, since the void can be represented only in a metalinguistic way.

It is significant that in this late phase Beckett returns to English for some of his prose writings. The reasons why he abandoned English are several. A prosaic one is that Beckett lived in France and dealt with French literary circles. One more intrinsic to his literary universe is that he needed to be a foreigner both in his private life and as a writer: he needed the alienating effect of a foreign tongue as a prop for his intensely self-conscious imagination—as a distancing principle which controlled the articulation of every word in the phrase.12 Beckett had certainly complained, before his French phase, of the difficulty of writing in his mother tongue. English, he argued, has been “abstracted to death” by the associative richness of its words and the poetic tradition lurking behind every term. It is interesting to see that in a late text like Worstward Ho Beckett feels strong enough to impose his own discipline and his own abstraction on the language, forging an idiom of his own which has very little to do with the English written by anybody else. Worstward Ho is a peculiar kind of achievement: it is abstract, almost dreary, devoid of ordinary human feeling, but it creates a beauty of its own through sheer linguistic contortion and its grim determination to force itself out of existence.

Stirrings Still returns to a more conventional narrative frame-

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11 Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

work, with one dominant and coherent story. A comparative glance at its opening and that of _Worstward Ho_ will illustrate this:


One night as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. (SS, 113)

Metalanguage and reflexivity are no longer so dominant, and human interest returns together with storytelling. Now is this human experience the writer’s own? The problem of the relationship between the writer’s life and his work is once more prominent in these late texts.

Samuel Beckett is an analytical artist, and he distrusts autobiography, perhaps because of its apparent randomness and its tendency to take a ready-made self for granted. Beckett uses memories and scenes from his life as raw material, but not as something already formed and valuable in itself. That is why his texts are at once so related to his life and at the same time so different from any kind of confessional literature.

Beckett therefore thematizes the end of his life through _his concern with form_—more specifically with narrative closure—and gives us some of the most memorable poetic evocations of death to be found in literature. In _Stirring Still_, the character hears a voice from within—a frequent motif in Beckett—which speaks of a longing for the end.

So on till stayed when to his ears from deep within oh now and here a word he could not catch it were to end where never till then. (SS, 125)

The character is beset by doubts: first, does the voice mean “how good” or “how awful”? Then again, is he now in that place, “where never till then”? These two obscure points seem to be inessential, since the character can make no sense of them—though it seems to him that he is, indeed, “where never till then”. The inner voice transcends all valuation and comparison, leaving only desire, desire for the end. All doubts are drowned by the faint voice inside him which draws the text to its moving end:

Such and such more such the hubbub in his mind so-called till nothing left from deep within but only ever fainted oh to end. No matter how no matter where. Time and grief and self so-called. Oh all to end. (SS, 128)

Time and grief, symbolised throughout the text by clock-strokes and cries, have become inseparable from the self. The character can’t stop hearing them. Indeed, he discovers that he hears them no matter whether he is indoors or outdoors, that the walls of his room make no difference—the voices and the clock-strokes have become a part of the self; the division between self and world has disappeared (cf. “Only in”; WH, 101). The room itself symbolizes a skull enclosing all reality; as in _The Unnameable_, the frontiers of the self have disappeared: there is no outside-the-I, there is no outside-the-text, and both the self and the text are calling for a closure.

In all of Beckett’s novels written since 1945 there are reciprocal references which turn them into a series, one long continued experiment in writing. Now, in his late texts, Beckett brings the series to an end. Not just the individual narratives, but also the long narrative of his life as a writer must be brought to an end. When the narrator of _Company_ says goodbye forever to the character Belacqua, who had appeared as a motif in nearly all of Beckett’s longer writings since _More Pricks than Kicks_, this farewell amounts to an acceptance that the series is a finite one, and nearly finished at that (C, 49). But the most effective way of bringing the whole _œuvre_ to an end is precisely through the concern of these narratives with their endings. The great works of Beckett’s most creative phase all ended in inconclusive ways: the Unnameable closes the trilogy with his famous: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on”; _Waiting for Godot_ has

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13 "A far more accessible and affecting work than the rebarbative _Worstward Ho_" (Alan Jenkins, "For to End Yet Again, Again").

14 Cf. Knowlson 557.
Vladimir and Estragon make a decision to go away, while in fact they
don't move; Play ends with an indication to repeat the whole play; even
Endgame looks as an endgame that is played again and again, with a
conclusion which is no more than another of the routine acts played by
Hamm and Clov.

In contrast, the works we have examined here prepare and
celebrate their own endings, and they structure themselves in order to
create a tension that is aimed towards its discharge. These narratives
know of their impending end: they prepare for it, it is an end fully
accepted. It is also an absolute ending: instead of “I can’t go on, I’ll go
on”, we here find “nohow on”.16 Each of these tales enacts this closure
in a more self-conscious way, squeezing in a few more lines before the
ultimate closure.17 In these stories, Beckett’s subject is more explicitly
than ever a meditation on mortality. This is why he becomes more like
himself: intensely personal and yet universal. Though the mood of his
writing becomes more personal, his evolution is a curve aimed at the
point where all narratives, personal or public, converge: the end. Among
the deaths of literary men, that of Samuel Beckett will be memorable
in more than one sense: it has become part of the substance of his work,
a mode of unrelenting self-fashioning.

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16 This contrast need not be interpreted as Richard Ellman does (“Personne de nulle part”, 22),
as a sign of increasing pessimism—it is rather a continued clarity of vision in the face of
reality.

17 For Jenkins, Stirrings Still has “the feel of a gravely heartfelt gesture towards last words”.

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chapter 3

Writing Arguments

As the opening chapters have suggested, when you write about an issue, you begin seeing it more deeply. By integrating relevant theories and by scrutinizing the logic and structure of your own position, you often discover that what you have been saying seems dubious or requires qualification or is simply an assertion of faith without persuasive supporting reasons. It follows, then, that writing is an act of discovering your argument, of developing and clarifying your thinking.

If you accept the notion that you learn about your ideas as you write, then you will accept the notion of writing as a process. A writer's ideas evolve through stages. For many writers it is impossible to achieve an effective final product without going through a series of revisions, expanding, and contracting. Too often students stop the process short, turning in a revoked product, something that is not yet "ready for critique" but that nonetheless a good draft is by becoming a good argument.

You should then interpret this piece of time as a formal arrangement for planning and editing, for drafting, and for extensive outlining and revision. It sometimes helps to think of revision as an editing (cleaning up errors) but not as "revision"—"seen again." To be willing to "see again" is to be willing to make major changes in your mind, even to throw out and rework your ideas from beginning to end. The more your final product differs from your final draft, the more you will be engaging in deep revision as opposed to surface editing that merely cleans up problems with spelling, punctuation, or grammar. A brief description of the kinds of processes skilled writers go through will help us clarify our point.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WRITING PROCESSES

Most writers go through exactly the same process in composing an argument. But your own, writing processes will vary from essay to essay depend-