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EDWARD COLERICK

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6305-2612>

Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities

e-mail: [edward.colerick@uph.edu.pl](mailto:edward.colerick@uph.edu.pl)

## **Samuel Beckett and the Death of Representation: *Rockaby, Ill Seen Ill Said and Worstward Ho***

### **Samuel Beckett i śmierć reprezentacji: *Rockaby, Ill Seen Ill Said i Worstward Ho***

**Keywords:** Representation, Pattern, Archetype, Worsening

#### **Abstract**

The article explores not only the link between Samuel Beckett's final two novellas and the late drama but also seeks to demonstrate the author's intent on stripping away the symbolism and imagery within his work in order to expose a life lived through the prism of representation; and, finally, to use his art to suggest something of the 'real' beneath the representational world. In this way the article demonstrates that the apotheosis of Beckett's entire oeuvre is to reduce his narrative and dramas to a single work which finds its most comprehensive embodiment in his final novella: *Worstward Ho*.

Entwined within both Samuel Beckett's prose and drama is a developing, though somewhat problematic, critique of representation. This in part springs from an early acceptance that art in aspiring toward truth must always be expressive of an act of failure; i.e. either it must locate itself in the prison of representational form or seek to turn away altogether from representation, that illusory world of Man. For Beckett both paths must lead to defeat – though it is toward the latter he will steer, seeking in vain for release. It is thus that the reader's focus is ever turned to those sets of underlying conditions and responses, lying 'least most' within the world of representation, which form a specific pattern or syntax. Indeed, in these final prose pieces he seems not only to be continuing the intertextual process he began with *The Trilogy*, but also the heroic task of trying

to reduce all his former works to one final text. The aim of this article then, is to show how Beckett's later prose and dramatic works attempt to locate, beyond representation, the trace or pattern of human existence (the 'character of the species') which underpins reality.

Eric P. Levy, for example, draws attention to a specific direction to which Beckett's entire oeuvre would seem to tend:

...we can see very clearly how the notion of living ('lives') presupposes a connection between a definite subject (in this example referred to in three ways as 'writer', 'he', and 'person') and his world. Beckett, in contrast, begins with the dissolution or departure of these poles, and undertakes the enormous task of exploring human experience struggling to reconstitute them. To this end he develops his remarkable narrator who becomes a universal human voice, the voice of species, seeking in the void the certainties of subject and object that made human experience intelligible (Levy 1980: 125).

However, what Levy terms the voice of species is similar to Cohen's assertion that Beckett's work is tending towards the expression of a universal 'everyman' (Cohen 1962: 288). However, this is not the direction Beckett's work ultimately takes in that it will increasingly attempt to question and undermine the pre-eminence and centrality of Man and of the human form. Indeed, in the search for pattern, on which life is ultimately predicated, any desire to reach the ideal position, where 'the certainties of subject and object' are to be located, becomes irrelevant. In Beckett's world both subject and object are component parts of the world of representation; it is the primary characteristic and nature of these components which for Beckett constitute a world beyond representation. As Culik observes: "In Samuel Beckett's work, this widespread cultural anxiety about the limits of representation appears through a notion of language as a progressively approximate measurement of an unnamable reality" (Culik 2008: 128).

Charles Krance, in his fascinating article on *Worstward Ho*, suggests the ultimate direction and point to which Beckett's reductionist method is leading in describing his 'entire oeuvre' as an "ongoing *desoeuvrement* of the 'death sentence', or *Arret de Mort*' (Krance 1990: 134). While I disagree with Krance's statement that Beckett's work is suggestive of an eternally arrested 'death sentence' I do, nevertheless, accept his general use of the term *desoeuvrement*. Krance in his notes is careful to provide a full definition of what he understands by the term *desoeuvrement*:

This term, which translates as 'idleness', and which in the phrase '*par desoeuvrement*' means 'for want of something to do', is one of the key concepts the

Blanchotian lexicon; for it literally designates the ‘unworking’ process which is always at work in the literary act of creating a *oeuvre*. Its kinship with the worstwardness of *Worstward Ho* should not go unnoticed (*ibid.*: 140).

Krance, in using this term, which he attributes to Blanchot, is suggesting that Beckett, through his fictions (in particular *Worstward Ho*), is engaged deliberately in a ‘process’ of ‘unworking’ the entire body of his writings.

Andrew Renton in his own fine essay on *Worstward Ho* significantly refers to this act of reductionism, whereby both the characters and their location are minimised to the ‘least most’ point leaving only the suggestion of form and space. Renton claims that through this process the novella’s “discourse turns upon itself, providing what could be read as a structural analysis of itself as archetypal novel or even drama” (Renton 1992: 113). This concept of an *archetypal* novel does not quite go as far as our claim that *Worstward Ho* is key to Beckett’s attempt to re-write all his previous fictions and so reduce them to a single work; however, it does lend weight to this supposition since ‘archetype’ suggests an original from which all others are in some way derived or copied.

In respect to this we can clearly locate interesting similarities, as one might expect, between *Ill Seen Ill said, Worstward Ho* and the late experimental drama. For example, the central female figure of *Ill Seen Ill Said* reminds us of Winnie in *Happy Days*, but even more so of *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*. To this extent, *Ill Seen Ill Said* forms a natural extension of Beckett’s previous work, particularly the drama which adopts the woman as its central figure in place of the former male character. Why such a change should have taken place in Beckett’s work is clearly suggested in the later *Worstward Ho*: here the narrator claims that the solitary human figure he dwells upon, though the description fits more easily earlier male figures, is in fact a woman. Since the narrator’s primary object in this unique work is to reduce or ‘worsen’ the figures which plague his imagination, we can assume that Beckett is attempting to ‘play on’ the false perception, still propagated in our patriarchal societies, that the female form and condition must somehow be less or worse than that of the male. In a sense this reading fits in very well with Beckett’s overall critique of representation, especially when we consider the kind of male character(s) Beckett has developed in his work, most prominent being that of tramp or wandering vagrant, e.g. Watt, Molloy, Macmann amongst others. These clearly represent highly marginalised individuals who exist only on the very fringes of society. In consequence, we can see that such characters or individuals challenge, simply by their very presence, accepted social and behavioural norms. This form of alienation further acts to undermine

the representational position and image of Man so embedded in the mythic, historic and even scientific structures of human life and society.

The whole process, then, of exposing and stripping away the representational elements of conscious existence is enhanced through the substitution of Man for Woman. The principal reason Beckett is able to employ this so effectively is the almost ubiquitous dominance of patriarchy; though radically challenged in Western society it still plays a major part in determining cultural and individual perception of gender roles. In the case of *Ill Seen Ill Said* and much of the later drama this is enhanced in that the woman is always ‘old’ – a lonely spinster who, because of her life, is largely excluded from mainstream society and, therefore, looked on with suspicion. The old spinster, often the butt of cruel jokes born out of fear, for in being old the woman is infertile and perceived of denying or having been denied sexual expression and the fulfilment of a ‘normal’ relationship. It is as if in this act of denial she has somehow challenged the whole of future society. In this way the old spinster seems to question the expected norms and structure of family life or even to pose a threat to male sexuality and power. This lack of perceived sexuality coupled with isolation may mean that the woman is scorned as nothing more than a lonely, frustrated neurotic. Such an image is powerfully distilled and questioned in *Rockaby*. Here the solitary figure of a nameless, old woman sits in her rocking chair while a voice chants in time to her motions; this is the voice of the woman attempting to conceal that the narrative she spins is really about herself by claiming that she is simply speaking of ‘another creature’ who is only ‘like herself’ (Beckett 1986: 435). It is here that we are also able to catch a glimpse of the woman’s own awareness of how others have come to see her<sup>1</sup>. Though the woman hides from this self-perception

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<sup>1</sup> This complex play of human perception is emphasised by Jane Alison Hale when she writes: “*Rockaby* is one of Beckett’s latest attempts to define a new dramatic perspective that takes into account the fluctuating, unstable, boundless, impossible nature of vision in a world where human beings no longer occupy a privileged, exterior, and omniscient point of view of the classical artist” (Hale 1988: 67). She also considers that: “We must remember that the woman we see listening to her own voice, which is coming to her from the outside, as is Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and the old face of *That Time*. This now-familiar Beckettian technique serves both to indicate to the spectators that we are penetrating the consciousness of the mute character on stage and to dramatise the dual nature of human perception – the division of every consciousness into a perceiving subject and a perceived object that can never coincide with each other, in spite of all one’s desires to join them into a perfect perception of the self” (ibid.: 68–69). Hale is right to stress Beckett’s brilliant portrayal of the schizophrenic nature of human perception; however, Beckett’s characters do not so much seek to reach a ‘perfect perception of self’ for they seem bent on ridding themselves of conscious perception altogether in order to escape the existence foisted upon them while they remain captives within the purgatorial confines of their representational worlds. They are actors indeed, forced to perform their partially scripted parts in the human world.

by placing it onto a fictional other, nevertheless, our attention is drawn to the fact that in having been brought up in the world she is all too well aware of the stereotype she has come to fill – and in this I suggest we can gauge something of the irony of her position:

all the years / all in black / best black / sat and rocked / rocked / till her end came / in the end came / off her head they said / gone off her head / but harmless (ibid.: 440).

On looking at the above quotation we find the harsh ‘off her head’ falls, like the other phrases, easily into the insistent rhythm of the rocking chair and its stark abruptness conveys something of the vicious and spiteful attitude in which she is generally viewed. This is made even more effective by the contrastingly gentle ‘but harmless’ which rather than taking the sting out of the former phrase only serves to patronise and reduce her further, creating a sense of distance between herself and her labellers. What is also interesting here is that in speaking of herself in the third person she stages an important split. In one sense she refuses to accept what she has become or rather is forced into a position of self-alienation in having to view herself through the conventions and norms of society which so condition and shape the representational world.

By taking the example of *Rockaby* and other later plays we can make a further useful connection with *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, one which entails another important transition. In this case we now see a change of narrative perspective from first to third person. In the drama *Not I*, for example, a bodiless mouth constructs the fragmented image of a life which it refuses to acknowledge as its own. In this case the horror of the individual’s existence is distanced or hidden by concealing it as a fiction just as we have noted with the later *Rockaby*. Not only that, but in the short play *That Time* Beckett presents us with the wonderfully autocritical “could you ever say I to yourself in your life... that was a great word with you before they dried up” (ibid.: 390). This clearly provides us with an important clue as to the reasons for such a change to have been deemed necessary by Beckett. The line from *That Time* both suggests continuity with previous texts while allowing for the crucial transition to take place; crucial in the sense that instead of presenting the ‘I’ which is unable to confirm its validity – its consistency – we have a process of story-telling unlike that found in earlier works, such as *The Trilogy* or *How It Is*, for now the narrative ‘I’ is actively concealed. Nevertheless, in both *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* we are pointed covertly towards the narrator or author, though the ever thinning and disjointed mask is never allowed to finally slip. In effect the very process

of story-telling fills the entire imaginary space of the texts leaving room for nothing else. However, this is curiously more suggestive than at any other point of something beyond the text in that we are consciously made aware that this is indeed an act of concealment. Similarly, as I have suggested, in *No I*, the confused narrative spewing out from the bodiless mouth gives it a form and a history it otherwise would not possess. However, the distance between speaker and discourse, staged both semantically and visually, is maintained to the end of the drama but not without hinting at collapse during the long tortuous struggle to be free of the represented self – the image of Man cast by society.

J. Gaillard, in her article on *Footfalls*, reaches similar conclusions when exploring the way Beckett employs specific devices to destabilise both the subjective voice and the ‘real’ world it names, especially in reference to the human body:

Because it presents a context of enunciation where the audience can confront the name and the body, theatre should be the form of bodily stability par excellence. In *Footfalls*, Beckett attacks the evident stability through a series of shifts and glitches in the pragmatics of enunciation that call into question the identity of the enunciating ‘I’ as well as the reality of its link to the body that it refers to (Gaillard 2018: 41–42).

However, the process Gaillard describes is overlaid in *Rockaby* in order to provide its audience with something altogether more tangible. Here repetition is used to generate an underlying physicality within the prose and drama, as A. Dennis, observes “Beckett’s work [...] demonstrates how the compulsive repetition of bodily movement, despite its uncomfortable closeness to addiction, may harness a loss of individual control that demands a more capacious understanding of human action” (2018: 6). In *Rockaby*, for example, though the voice speaks only in the third person both in its description and rhythm, which matches the chair’s rocking motion, we have a sense that what is being conveyed are the figure’s innermost thoughts. However, though the distance between voice and figure is still further staged by the narrative being constructed in the past tense, the gap is curiously obliterated as the rhythmic discourse catches the kinetic energy of the rocking chair’s movements drawing it into the present. Here indeed is the physical enactment of that vital and inexplicable force of life that drives the individual on, even in its self professed futility.

What we are presented with is the terrible tension between the individual who refuses to accept the awful narrative or representation of her life, a life built on the powerful repetitive echoes of frustration and loneliness, and the force

or Will which will not allow her to be free of the illusion. Here the split between self and voice serves only to reinforce the connection between them, a kind of double in which each forms the mirror image of the other. The impression is of seeing oneself as if indeed one were an actor on the stage being forced to play a particular part. Again it is the idea of the world, its visual reality which is challenged – we see the lights the stage, the props – the codes and narratives into which we come not only to see and recognise others, but also to measure ourselves in relation to them. In this way the stage figure ceases to be important; she is built up slowly through the repetitive phrases yet the disparate images are just as easily broken down<sup>2</sup>. The body and life become an empty chain of association, a hollow reverberation – what becomes real is the insistent rhythm of voice and rocking chair which hold and support the otherwise empty images.

In the late novella, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the description of the woman, as in *Rockaby*, is cumulative; we catch only glimpses of a figure ‘all in black’ suggestive more of absence than presence. What picture we do form emerges mainly from the clothing ‘dress’ and ‘stockings’ and the ‘boots’ which ‘have time to be ill buttoned’ (Beckett 1982: 18). Here we can draw a further interesting comparison with *Rockaby*: in the play’s stage directions we have the clear instruction that the woman is to be dressed in ‘black high-necker evening gown’ with ‘sequins’ and ‘headdress’ (Beckett 1986: 433) both of which are purposely designed to ‘glitter’ as the rocking chair moves back and forth in and out of the concentrated spot-light; the shiny wood of the chair is also similarly designed to catch the light. In this way, like the impression of the ‘glimmering buttonhook’ in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, we have the staged visual presentation of a tenuous, insubstantial ghost-figure, a figure which seems to be not quite really there; and for a moment we might think that it is indeed spun out of the either and into our imaginations by the solitary but insistent voice being played out over the set

In *Worstward Ho* we find a similarity of intent in seeking not only to expose the representational world but also the very mechanics behind its construction. Although *Worstward Ho* is markedly different in style from *Ill Seen Ill Said*, it similarly avoids the use of commas in favour of the full stop so that the whole is broken into complete short phrases. However, the syntax has an even more awkward feel about it and there is a wider use of cliché and oxymoron in order once again to force the reader into a constant awareness of the impossibility of what is being presented. However, the essential difference is that *Worstward*

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<sup>2</sup> Another very good example of this is to be found in the development of Beckett’s short play *Catastrophe* (Beckett 1986: 455–461).

*Ho* strips away the kinds of symbolism noted not only in *Ill Seen Ill Said* but which has been also characteristic of most of Beckett's earlier work. Such a departure is significant, not least because it clearly forms part of a process in which even as the reader is drawn into the world of the imagination, that same world is brutally laid bare. The figures are termed 'shades', indicating they are without colour<sup>3</sup> and only have the suggestion of definite form. These 'shades' are themselves set in a void and by the end of the text will be reduced to merely: "Three pins. One pinhole. In dimmest dim" (Beckett 1983: 46). Their presence, paradoxically, is more evocative of space and absence.

The narrator begins by presenting a slowly emerging figure (later confirmed as a woman) who will painfully stand upright before being brought to her knees (ibid.: 7–10), like the figure in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The language here suggests a struggle is taking place, a struggle driven by the inexplicable force of life itself, the same force which drives Molloy on toward the mother he hates and Malone to his next breath, here will force the narrator to give form and semblance to the 'shade' he dwells upon.

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 either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all. (Beckett 1983: 8)

Here we find not just the phrase containing the oxymoron "Fail again. Better again. Or Better worse", but also what appears at first to be an oxymoron of overall design. The object of the narrator is to 'worsen' the images and figures he creates or finds already posited within his consciousness. However, the oxymoron lies in the fact that the unfortunate narrator is forced, in order to achieve this process of worsening, to build-up the still complex imagery and detail within the text.

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<sup>3</sup> Hale, in the essay I already noted on *Rockaby*, observes that "black and white, the predominant colours of Beckett's latest works, evoke for him the undifferentiation of the void, towards which tends human life and all the perceptual efforts of which it consists from the very moment of birth" (Hale 69). In fact this reading by Hale is bleaker than Beckett intends. For example, as we have already seen, Beckett was attempting to get beyond colour in his composition of *The Trilogy*. This need to be rid of colour is not a recognition of our diminishment to the point whereby we merely fade into the void, but rather of a desire to reach beyond the representational to the colourless patterns and shapes on which life is formed.



No choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Somehow stand. That or groan. The groan so long on its way. No. No groan. Simply pain. Simply up. A time when try how. Try see. Try say. How first it lay. Then somehow knelt. Bit by bit. Then on from there. Bit by bit. Till up at last. Not now. Fail better worse now (ibid.: 10).

As we can see from the above quotation, the narrator not only builds up a picture of the figure he must present, but that it must also assume a certain form, that of a human being – the form ultimately forced upon the reluctant narrator’s of Beckett’s previous works. However, in departure from these texts the narrator is no longer obliged to fill in the sort of detail he had before of “How somehow lay. Then somehow knelt” – in other words to outline its progress up from the ‘slime’ and on towards the ‘light’. The process attacked by Beckett so early on in his writing career<sup>4</sup> and so instrumental in the formulation of his own aesthetic, now, in terms of Beckett’s artistry, begins to reach the final stages of its development.

Here, in a sense, we have the process of fiction-making in reverse. For though we find in this text a gradual build-up of certain detail in order ironically to reduce the very forms being presented, we need also to look at this in relation to Beckett’s work as a whole and align it to the overall development we have sought to outline in this study. In doing so I suggest we can make the bold claim that all the different texts seem part of the same work, the same text in the act of being constantly re-written. From this we can see that *Worstward Ho* forms a kind of final apotheosis – in effect the last stage of that work’s development. In this way we can look at *Worstward Ho* as representing all the other previous texts only now with most of the fundamental detail removed. The characters or figures, as I have already indicated, are acknowledged as ‘shades without colour’, and the setting in which they are found is reduced almost to nothing – a bare ever dimming void<sup>5</sup>. However, in this we can see how all the characters of the previous texts are here stripped away until the only figures which remain are of a woman, an old man and child along with a bare human skull. This is now all that is needed and we can see that these three simple forms match

<sup>4</sup> For example, Beckett considers in relation to art that: “The history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure... in a kind of tropism towards the light as to the nature of which the best opinions continue to vary, and with a kind of Pythagorean terror, as though irrationality of pi were an offence against the deity, not to mention his creature” (Beckett 1983: 145).

<sup>5</sup> Renton comments on this particular phenomenon when he suggests that everything is stripped of its veneer or covering; constructions of the previous discourse (Renton 1992: 125). Renton, however, only extends this act of ‘revision’ as far as the ‘previous discourse’ or fragment of the text.

those characters and combination of characters we have met before, though now utterly without feature.

For example, it is fitting that the narrator first dwells on the woman, for she has become the principal character of Beckett's later prose and drama and therefore in the natural sequence of things the first to arise stubbornly in the narrator's imagination. However, it is interesting that in appearance and dress, wearing a large 'black greatcoat' and 'hat' (ibid.: 15), clearly resembles the comic grotesques of Beckett's earlier works. The old and sexless woman not only reminds us of those former androgynous creatures which litter Beckett's work but also of such characters as we find in *Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Rockaby* and of course *Ill Seen Ill Said*. It is here also that we find the final extremes of an ongoing process, for as with *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* we are presented with an ever diminishing form which almost immediately as it stands is brought to its knees, the very same symbolic position the old woman in *Ill Seen Ill Said* will find herself inexplicably forced to assume. However, as we can see from the previous quotation, all such acts in *Worstward Ho* are stripped of much of their symbolic content, the archaic 'knelt' has merely the soft ring of weary compliance rather than active prayer.

The appearance of the 'old man and child' shows only a partial reprieve of the act of stripping the narrative to its bare minimum: "So little worse the old man and child. Gone held holding hands they plod apart. Left right barefoot unreceding on. Not worsen yet the rift. Save for some after nohow somehow worsen on." The quotation clearly shows that the act of 'worsening' is part of a progressive process; however, the narrator is reluctant to go too far too quickly. The narrator's caution is in part due to the fear of running out of words, of taking things to the point where he can no longer continue. This is a fear which, to some extent, is mirrored by Winnie in *Happy Days*; in Winnie's case it is the horror of having nothing left to give colour to her sterile existence, while in *Worstward Ho* I suggest we are more aware of the tension between needing to go on and, in contrast to Winnie who fills her life with fictions to conceal herself from her true condition, attempting to be free of the world of representation and one's own place and image within it. In this way we can perhaps locate a further essential and paradoxical strand in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and especially *Worstward Ho*; paradoxical because we can see that this reduction which takes place in both texts on one hand leads us into a world of pure imagination, while on the other points more than in any previous example of Beckett's work towards a notion of the 'real'.

For example in the search for the 'real' beyond representation Krance comments that:

[...] unlike countless other attempts before it to get it all said so as to have unsaid it all, *Worstward Ho* commits the initial error of predicating (i.e. grounding) its entire strategy of undoing itself on the projection into beinglessness of nothing less than being itself. Thus from its very inception, the opening vocable, *on*, or *being* in Greek, engages the ensuing enterprise upon an endlessly predatory ‘gnawing’ away at the meaning of being... (Krance 1990: 31).

Krance in making this observation leans too heavily on Heidegger and as a consequence construes a fundamental ‘error’ in the seeming paradox of Beckett’s approach. For example, as Butler points out Dasein (‘being-there’) offers an essentially existential view of the self: “The self just is not any ‘given’ thing, like another arm or leg say, there is no ‘nature’ for the self to possess, no ‘essence’ except, of course, Dasein’s special kind of essence which is ‘existence’. So the self is existential” (Butler 1984: 31). Therefore, quotes Butler from *Being and Time*, “Dasein is itself only in existing” (Heidegger 1962). Following this we must consider that if Beckett was attempting to be rid of ‘being’ in the sense of ‘Dasein,’ he would indeed be on the false road of also trying to be rid of “its special kind of essence which is existence”.

As we have demonstrated, Beckett does not present us with an existential view-point, his characters clearly do not occupy an existential void (a void which also is part of the world of representation), their actions are largely conditioned by their nature rather than experience, and they must rather follow the dictates of an inexplicable force. Beckett’s characters form part of a pattern, a pattern of existence from which their own individual nature will emerge. In this way we can see that there is no contradiction in Beckett’s approach, for by stripping away at the mind’s conscious operations, one is effectively thinning the veil of representation which cuts the individual from an immediate knowledge of his own nature and thereby exposing something of the fundamental reality or pattern of his existence.

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