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THE “RIP WORD” AND TATTERED SYNTAX:

From “the word go” to “the word begone”.

Samuel Beckett once described an early poem as “the work of a very young man with nothing to say and the itch to make.” (Harvey 1970b: 273). Beckett may have been recalling the 1934 review which found *More Pricks Than Kicks* “uninformed by any real passion or direction” and “[t]he author’s skill not hiding the fact that Mr. Beckett has nothing to say”, even if Beckett, the reviewer says, “read James Joyce with loving care”.¹ Critics discount Beckett’s severe self-criticism. “The Beckett of today”, Harvey pronounces, is “severe in his judgment of the young poet in his twenties” (1970: 273); “it is less clear” with hindsight the young “author had ‘nothing to say’”, John Piling protests (1999: 15). But linguistic fabrications without content long preoccupied Beckett. In “Recent Irish Poetry” (1934), those he dubbed “our leading twilighters” (1984a: 71) —including W. B. Yeats—were “beyond the jewels of language”, he wrote. “At the centre there is no theme”, adding “and without a theme there can be no poem, as witness”. Yeats’s exclamation: “What, be a singer born and lack a theme!”. The mocking tone targets both the poet with a gift to no purpose and the need for a theme.

The itch to make was what drove Beckett on, not something he wanted to say. The ostensible *raison d’être* of the early works was the display of linguistic cleverness. This passion for manipulating language was surely what drew Beckett to Joyce. “Bon qu’à ça”, he famously declared when asked why he wrote—“good for nothing else.” The pithy statement was also the admission of a gift which was the only talent Beckett felt the urge to use. Yet toward it he felt a *méfiance*: was it facile virtuosity, like the “competence that must be most painful to him” Beckett attributes to André Masson

¹ Quoted in Allen 2004.

(1984a: 140)?² One of those “things about himself he didn’t like” Beckett alluded to Herbert Blau must have been that facility, giving rise to the same self-loathing when it comes to his writings, aside from his epitaph, *First Love’s* speaker feels. “My other writings are no sooner dry than they revolt me, but my epitaph still meets with my approval” (1974a: 12). For the early work is studded with “jewels of language”, despite Beckett’s struggle to produce “nudist” writing (his label for Yeats’ in “A Coat” (1984a: 71) or, at best, to wear a “low-church . . . surplice” (2009a: 134-5). He was paralyzed in fear of exposing himself in verbal nullity, his one gift a linguistic talent to no purpose.

These “crises de négation” (1984a 37) would be erected into a kind of credo in “Three Dialogues”: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with an obligation to express” (1984a: 139). The absence of a subject became a kind of subject. “The subject doesn’t matter, there is none” (1958: 354). The itch to write first found its missing subject in the style’s endless reiterations of the conviction there was nothing worth doing but saying and nothing to be said not already said. This is the theme of generation as the reproduction of like by like, Beckett’s “brotherly likes,” in the potentially infinite series of “my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my father’s fathers . . .” (1953a: 46-7). Such series are everywhere in Beckett. Their burden is that there is nothing new under the sun, as *Murphy’s* opening insists, no individual not submerged by the generic. The round of generations is also a theory of language and literary history. Every new writer is condemned to “keep on saying the same old thing, generation after generation” (1958: 376). Much of the middle style derives its humor and energy from the attempt to exhaust such series in what Beckett names “une sorte de ronde syntaxique” (1984a: 125), seemingly empty linguistic exercises whose content demonstrates this theme.

But after the trilogy, another subject emerged, what *A Piece of Monologue* calls the matter of “the dead and gone”. It takes form late with *How It Is* and the appearance of “the image”. Beckett distinguishes his images from those “not for the eyes made of words” (1964: 45); his are “the kind I see sometimes in the mud” (1964: 11), but *seen* not by the outer eyes, always blue, but by “my eyes not the blue the others at the back” (1964: 8). *Ill Seen Ill Said* speaks of “this filthy eye of flesh” (65) and “an eye having no need of light to see.” (50) It closes to see within.

The images, flashing in the light to one in the mud (*How It Is*) and the dark (*Company*), consist of “little scenes” (1964: 97) in which appear the speaker’s mother, his younger self and glimpses of Ireland. By contrast with the dim grey light, their flashes of light come and go intermittently, suddenly and unpredictably to the inner

² “S’agit-il de voir dans *Whoroscope* et, partant, dans l’œuvre à venir le prestige d’une virtuosité linguistique hors pair ou les stigmates d’une entreprise mortifère ?” (Bizub, 2012 : 284).

eyes without being called up at will, involuntary images of the past. Ultimately, they are reduced to one *Ur*-image: that of clouds parting at sunset — “too late” — to reveal a bit of blue sky, designated by a kind of short hand: “a little blue in the mud . . . little scenes skies especially” (1964: 76), “life above in the light a little blue little scenes” (1964 127). *Watt*’s opening already invokes “These northwestern skies. . . . really extraordinary. . . . You think it is all over and then pop! Up they flare, with augmented radiance” (1953a: 15). This late-breaking sky, Beckett’s madeleine, comes to encapsulate Ireland, stripped by forgetfulness of every other association—politics, history, personal associations—and reduced to its minimal, memorable core, in *Murphy* to “all she [Celia] remembered of Ireland.” (280). Hence the resonance for Beckett of Yeats’s lines from “The Tower”: “but the clouds of the sky/When the horizon fades”.³

The image introduces the new “matter” of loss, of lessness, of a movement not in rounds but worstward, not Joyce’s “the seim anew” but change, although for the worse. In *How It Is*’s French original, dispelling the illusion that “cher Pim” (1961 114) will “come back” or “another will come better than Pim” (1964 23) in the endless procession of Pims and Boms, the evocation of “Pim disparu” (1961 81) recalls Proust. Particular members of the series may be irrevocably lost, hence unique. The revelation of this possibility provides the strange antidote for the paralysis arising from the idea that nothing new ever appears, that there is nothing to say that hasn’t already been said.

The first theme never wholly disappears; it continues as a *basso continuo*, counterpoint to the burden of loss; the images appear above the procession of Pim substitutes. The two form twinned “matters”, two variations on saying something about nothing, captured by the dantesque geography of *How It Is*, *Company* and the little text *Lessness*. On the one side, the dim world and the pared-down landscape of the one in the dark of the present, where all is unchangingly the same: white ashes, cloudless grey sky, no stirrings, no alternation of light, calm. On the other side, changing skies—clouds, rain and blue, night and day—, change of loves, stirrings, all the images represent. The blue of sky is never presented as changeless (this is not a Mediterranean world); only the grey cloudless sky is: Beckett describes voluntary memory as “the past in monochrome” (1957b: 19); the images present a colored past. It is a changing Irish sky, not Paris’s “ciel bas et lourd”—hence rain and blue are conjugated. Changelessness spells ennui, spleen, according to the author of *Proust*, but also the calm of a calmative. Change brings untranquilized “suffering,” yet “opens a window on the real” (1957b: 16). As the author of *Proust* put it, the pendulum swings between boredom and suffering. “On the one hand embers. On the other ashes.” (1996: 72). Ashes hide

³ Marjorie Perloff (2007) claims that, removed from Yeats’s poem, Beckett’s use of “but” changes Yeats’ meaning of “only” to “a disclaimer”. But in Beckett’s late work, “but” as “only” predominates.

embers, something that once was, something colored, stirring still, if only barely, the flare of the image in the mud.

There comes the point when the first matter—“Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond” joining the endless procession of sames—is subsumed by the second and the voice of *A Piece of Monologue* pronounces: “Waiting on the rip word. . . . Treating of other matters. Trying to treat of other matters. Till half-hears there are no other matters. Never were other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and going. From the word go. The word begone.” (1984b: 269).

To the one lying in the dark, the question is: are the images, signs of a changing world, merely “figments comfortless” (*Company*: 40)? For only the unchanging stasis in the present indubitably exists—the *cogito* is obligatorily present tense. Gontarski, invoking Beckett’s “anti-empiricism”, posits “the rejection of the ‘verifiability’ of immediate knowledge since in Beckett’s fictive world all is re-presentation” (1996: xxi). But what is immediately present in the closed-space and grey light in which the deviser devises needs no verification. *Company*’s opening makes this point: “Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified. As for example when he hears, You first saw the light on such and such a day” (1996: 3). What calls for verification are such statements, what Gontarski’s “re-presentations”, the after-images of past experience, testify to. Beckett’s “reason-ridden” (1996: 24) imagination seeks this verification. The images of life in the light by contrast with stasis in the dark are uncertain wills-of-the-wisp, subject to doubt: “Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost . . . he all but said ghost loved ones” (1984b: 269). Determining whether they are figments is a Cartesian project: to combine two propositions, one past, the other present—“You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark”—“perhaps from the incontrovertibility of the one to win credence for the other” (1996: 3). This marks the cogitations of the insomniac in the dark as indubitable by contrast with a past event, subject to doubt.

“Figment,” typically restricted to the phrase “figment of the imagination”,⁴ suggests something unreal, created by the mind. Deleuze uses the phrase “Faire une image”, quoting the last line of “L’Image”: “c’est fait j’ai l’image” (1992: 71). But “faire” is not equivalent to “est fait”. Bruno Clément notes that “L’Image”’s last line is corrected a few months later in *Comment c’est* to “j’ai eu l’image”, pronouncing the change a “Différence

⁴ It is a Berkeleyan word, appearing in “figments of the mind” in the 1744 *Siris* to assert the realism of Plato’s ideas, e.g., goodness, beauty, realer than the fleeting objects of sense and interestingly not for physical objects. *Watt’s* “figments of the id” (59) connects figments to the real.

énorme” passing “d’une théorie de l’imagination active à une théorie de l’imagination passive.” (2008: 27). But the passive reading is already in the first version’s passive voice.

Some things are incontrovertibly pronounced figments. The English *Company* makes “figment” the complement of “devise”: “Devising figments to temper his nothingness” (1996: 33)—the fictional “creatures” M and W seem intended. The French *Compagnie* translates “figments” here as “chimères” (1980: 62-3), suggesting not conscious making but something monstrous the mind produces unconsciously. “Chimères” (24) also is translated as “imaginings” in *Ill Seen Ill Said* (65).

Most critics accept the word “figment” as Beckett’s definitive assertion about the images. Peter Boxall equates it with “story”: “the figment of a life up above in the light” is “a story that is told to Pim by the voice” (2009b: 102). Clément writes that “Beckett imagine des fictions, des scénarios, des images”, blurring the distinctions that he claims Beckett is careful to make. J. M. Coetzee, in his elegant analysis of *Lessness*’s random order, hesitates with a “perhaps”: “The blank walls and white light of the earlier tomb/womb existence are ‘all gone from mind’ and perhaps only after all ‘figments.’ . . . day and night, the only events to differentiate a world of stasis. But this pair as well, ‘figment dawn dispeller of figments and the other called dusk’ . . . , is suspected of being not events out there but events . . . of imagining consciousness.” Coetzee, speculating that “the first half of *Lessness*” gives “figments of day and the second . . . figments of night, or vice versa”, concludes that “the two halves of the book reciprocally cancel each other, and we are left with a fiction of net zero . . . traces of a consciousness elaborating and dismissing its own inventions” (1973: 198).

But instead of the dismissal of the grey present and lighted past as all equally fictions—the present is not subject to doubt—; it is the status of a past which is in question—not solely that of blank walls and light but the landscape of blue sky and cloud. *Lessness*’s two refrains “Never was but . . .” and “he will . . .” alternately assert the sole existence of an unchanging present in soundless, grey air and predict change “under the changing skies” (1995: 165). From within the grey world of the present, all change seems “figment”, “vanished dream”, “imaginings”: “figment the passing light”, “Figment light never was but grey air timeless” (1995: 197, 199), “Never but in vanished dream the passing hour” (198), “Never but silence such that in imagination this wild laughter these cries” (199), “Never but imagined the blue in a wild imagining the blue celeste of poesy” (201). Change, inexistent in the present, is evoked in the future—“will”—, equivalent to an implicit past—“will . . . again”. “He will curse God again as in the blessed days face to the open sky the passing deluge”; “it will be day and night again”; “Old love new love as in the blessed days unhappiness will reign again.” The past returns as the quintessential image/memory—“the blue celeste”, “stir in the sky”, “On him will rain again as in the blessed days of blue the passing cloud” (197: 199).

Ill Seen Ill Said explicitly questions the word *figment*'s adequacy to the images. “Things and imaginings” are “all confusion”. That her image is mere figment is presented as a wish contrary to fact: “If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. . . . Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be” (1996: 58).

The images occur in “the madhouse of the skull”, translation of “le manicomie du crâne” in *Mal vu mal dit* (1981: 24). It picks up the phrase “La folle du logis” (1981: 21) a few pages earlier, “le nom que Malebranche donne à l’imagination”, Clément notes, adding that *Mal vu mal dit* is “une réflexion sur l’imagination d’une rigueur . . . exemplaire”. Clément takes the phrase to refer to the text’s old woman (2008: 28). But Clément’s rigor is less than Beckett’s: the translation of “La folle du logis s’en donne à coeur chagrin”—“Imagination at wit’s end spreads its sad wings” (1996 56)—confirms the phrase designates not the old woman but imagination.⁵ The madwoman imagination occupies the madhouse of the skull. If the old woman is “cooped up there” too, the nagging question remains: is she thereby pure figment?

For if the old woman is not outside the mind, she is not necessarily created by it. Coetzee thinks the images are “not events out there but events . . . of imagining consciousness”. “Events” captures their mind-independent appearance; even if they appear *in* the mind, they are not consciously “made up” or willed. *Seen* inwardly, with the inner eyes, they have the “adventitiousness” both Descartes and Berkeley attribute to sense-data. The images are not fictions, but sense-data first registered distractedly that re-present themselves after a lapse of time. *Fizzle 2* explains: “It is in the outer space, not to be confused with the other, that such images develop.” (1995: 230). The “offal of experience” (1957b: 59) furnishes the material for the images, just as the time wasted in the salons furnishes Proust’s material.

The figments consciously produced by the mind—e.g., *Company*'s “creatures”—are, in fact, calmatives. By contrast, the ghostly fragments arising involuntarily from an unknown source, because not indubitably figments,⁶ are thereby endowed with the ability to disturb habit which Beckett saw as the property of Proust’s involuntary memory. “Not possible any longer except as figment. Not endurable”, *Ill Seen Ill Said* asserts (1996: 65), admitting they are less threatening if thought figments. The eye seeks some calmative to shut out the images’ uncontrollable, panic-causing comings and goings: “close eye calm long last all gone from mind” (1995: 198). Yet their disturbance can reveal the new, the real. The images not as hallucinations but as

⁵ See Cohn 2001: 367, which also gives the correct reading.

⁶ Cf. “Dead or alive, fact or fiction, ‘elle’ hovers between the two” (Cohn 2001: 367).

fragments of the past alternatively makes them “the only Paradise that is not the dream of a madman, the Paradise that has been lost” (1957b: 55).

The images as seen not devised explains the role of the eye in *Ill Seen Is Said* and the camera “eye (E)” in *Film* (1984b: 163). The model for these texts structured by an observing eye is surely the scene in *La Recherche* Beckett cites in which Proust’s narrator first hears his grandmother’s “strange real voice,” (1957b: 15) on the telephone and later, unobserved, observes her reading. In this inhabital moment, “he realizes with horror that his grandmother is dead, that the cherished familiar” created by habit is now a “mad old woman,”—Beckett echoes Proust in calling Molloy’s mother “this deaf blind impotent mad old woman” (1958: 15), as he later echoes his own paraphrase of Proust, the “carefully arranged mask of” the grandmother’s “features” (1957b: 15) in “How serene it seems this ancient mask. . . . Worthy those worn by certain newly dead” (1996: 62). Suddenly the original progenitor, far from being one of a sequence of anonymous mothers and mother’s mothers, becomes “a stranger whom he has never seen” (1957b: 15) with “the essence of a unique beauty” (1957b: 72) and hence cruelly irreplaceable.

The image is strangely detached—“each one is kept at its distance” (1957b: 550)—, as if the image were the mirror of an original perception which, like a Medusa head, cannot be gazed at directly but only through the lens of time, Proust’s telescope: “life in the light first image some creature or other I watched him . . . from afar through my spy-glass sidelong in mirrors through windows” (1964: 9). In Beckett’s words on Proust’s narrator, from the distance of time “he suffers with her whom he had not seen suffer, as though, for him as for Françoise, . . . who cannot restrain her tears when informed that there has been an earthquake in China, pain could only be focussed at a distance” (1957b: 30). “I never see nor write to nor hear from nor am seen by Ethna MacC. now”, Beckett wrote Thomas McGreevy. “‘Tis better thus!”, he continued, “I incline to the opinion that when it is not possible to see people simply it is more satisfactory to wait till they turn up in the memory. I can’t see her and I can’t imagine her. Occasionally it happens that I remember her and then, presto!” (2009a: 135) The inner eye can gaze its fill only when the object is an image beyond embrace, beyond exchange of words, when the “only true Paradise” is a lost one (1957b: 25-6).

The images, then, are internal pictures of those no longer present before “the eye of flesh” restored in flashes to the “other” eye (1996: 56). The familiar mother was “the caricature furnished by direct perception” (4); the stranger, irrevocably gone, is revealed “as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family” (1957b: 11). “She shows herself only to her own. But she has no own. Yes yes she has one. And who has her” (1996 53). Roland Barthes sought the essence of the dead mother in a photo, in the process breaking with the Barthes of “L’Effet du Réel” and discovering “[t]he photograph is literally the emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (1981: 80). Beckett’s

image similarly presents itself directly to the other eye. “It restores . . . more because less, more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, . . . and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real” (1957b: 20). “You lie in the dark with closed eyes and see the scene. As you could not at the time” (1996: 27). But the gulf between “was there” and “is here” is cruelly and perhaps mercifully for Beckett unbridgeable. In “...but the clouds...,” the image testifies that she who is lost had once been there: “For had she never once appeared, all that time, would I have, could I have, gone on begging”? (260) The object of this perception is the appearance only of a physical body long gone. The eerie twist on Berkeley’s *esse est percipi (aut percipere)* is that the one caught by the “scrutiny” eye persists in existing as long as perceived by a kind of paradox—“the dead are only dead in so far as they continue to exist in the heart of the survivor” (1957b: 29). But the one that sees, prisoner of the act of *percipere* (1957b: 27) whose objects are the old woman’s unseeing “longed-for eyes” (1996: 62), albeit as spectral as she, feels “the despair of the spectator” she is spared (1957b: 29) of ever being seen.

The image captured on the photographic plate can be more or less permanently fixed, while the image fleetingly recorded on the retina can only with difficulty be re-accessed, can only be awaited: in “...but the clouds . . .,” “in the dark” M “began to beg, of her, to appear . . . a begging of the mind, to her, to appear” (1984: 260). If the image appears, it is solely to the one whose eye initially recorded it. It remains impossibly private, in no way “downloadable”, fragile, with a date of expiration. In *How It Is*, the images appear with a clarity they lose in the later works. “Ill half seen.” (1996: 54) “Winter evening. Not to be precise. All so bygone” (1996: 60), “at first sight ill seen and every year rather more so” (1996: 62-3). Their blurring is also a function of the eye, which mists, fills with tears: “Long this image till suddenly it blurs” (1996: 57). They also appear with decreasing frequency. “From one moment of the year to the next suddenly no longer there. . . . Then as suddenly there again” (56). Yet the images cannot be wiped out by “interpos[ing] my hand, or clos[ing] my eyes . . . or tak[ing] off my eyeglasses for them to fade” (1995: 230) or ripping them. They perish only with the beholder’s disappearance. “What is it defends her? Even from her own. Averts the intent gaze. . . Forbids divining her. What but life ending. Hers. The other’s. But so otherwise” (1996: 55-6). The skull which inters them finally empties.

If Pim turns out to be unique, irreplaceable—i.e. if no substitute is like Pim—, as also the mother of the images and the late-clearing Irish sky, then this discovery demands a language for the “widowed eye” unlike the “ronde[s] syntaxique[s]”, endlessly returning the same, asserting, then denying their propositions, canceling out their meaning as Coetzee thought the two parts of *Lessness* do. A syntax for which the “rip” word gives the key. While aware it refers to *requiescat in pace* abbreviated on a tombstone as R.I.P, critics have still speculated as to what word Beckett had in mind. “The rip word in *A Piece of Monologue* is ‘begone’”, Kristin Morrison thinks (1982:

349). Gontarski thinks a “pivotal word, what in ‘A Piece of Monologue’ is called ‘the rip word, in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is ‘less,’ in *Worstward Ho*, like *Company*, . . . is ‘gone’” (1996: xxv). In fact, there is no particular word but a kind of word of which these are examples and which functions to give the skeleton of syntax.

The verb “rip” in *A Piece of Monologue*—“Ripped off and torn to shreds”—suggests a principle of linguistic fragmentation. The line refers to photos once on the wall (the text links image and photo). In the “the mother-haunted *Ill Seen Ill Said*”, as Gontarski calls it (1996: xx), the “eye functions with the cruel precision of the camera” and “photographs the reality of” the old woman, as Beckett says Proust’s narrator’s eye does his grandmother (1957b: 15); in *Film* it is the son caught by the camera eye while, like the old woman, pouring over a photo album. In both *A Piece of Monologue* and *Film*, photos are torn to pieces, becoming akin to the “Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing” Murphy saw in his mind (1957a: 252). Ruby Cohn reported that Beckett “wrote his sixty different sentences [of *Lessness*] in six families, each family arising from an image” (Cohn 1973: 265). So, like *How It Is*’s syntax, *Lessness*’s fragments of language arise out of images, scraps of an ancient voice—auditory images heard in the skull—out of scraps of images. A connection between “figment” and “fragment” is established. Cohn recounts of *Lessness*’s composition that not only did its “sentences”—i. e., syntactic units punctuated by periods—originate in images, but that “Beckett wrote each of these sixty sentences on a separate piece of paper, mixed them all in a container, and then drew them out in random order twice” (Cohn 1973: 265). The earlier *All Strange Away* could have been similarly composed, and the “tattered syntaxes” (1995: 169), “syntaxes upended in opposite corners” (171), invokes also scraps of paper, akin to the “[t]housand shreds [of photos] under the bed with the dust and spiders.”⁷ (1984: 266). A syntax of fragments often less than full sentences, “Such bits and scraps” of images are “Seen no matter how and said as seen” (1996: 66); “the tattered sky”—the phrase appears in *Murphy* (1957a: 239)—accomplishes the break-up of *Watt*’s and the trilogy’s syntactic rounds.

These scraps of language are nonetheless well-formed bits of syntax. Here Beckett has intuited the leveling of syntax to the “Maximal Projections” of Noam Chomsky’s Bar Notation,⁸ where the sentence and the other phrasal categories share the same linguistic structure. The change to a style of scraps begins with *Waiting for Godot*, where broken dialogue replaces the monologues of the Trilogy. The dramas’ fragmented

⁷ “Sheets of black paper, stick them to the wall with cobweb and spittle” (1995: 170) suggests a connection.

⁸ See Chomsky 1986 and also Banfield 2013.

syntax then becomes that of the late prose monologues. Even the unpunctuated *How It Is* is tattered: the original manuscript of *Comment c’est* is punctuated like the later texts.⁹

Beckett’s diminutives “bits,” “scraps,” “bribes” and “tatters” capture another property of the late style. It is almost entirely pieced together out of a quite restricted part of the lexicon, that consisting of the closed-class, i.e., non-productive “grammatical” or functional categories such as determiners, quantifiers, pronouns as well as inflectional morphemes like tense and plural and the bound morphemes of derivational morphology, as well as most prepositions. Emonds (2000, chapters 3, 4) calls this part of the lexicon “the Syntacticon,” in contrast to “the Dictionary” of open-class, productive lexical categories like nouns, adjective/(qualitative) adverbs, verbs and certain more complex prepositions (e.g., *alongside*, *on board*, *in case of*, *because of*, *downstairs*), Beckett’s “big words” (1995:103), categories for which new members can be coined. This division is inherited from structuralist grammars, but the Syntacticon adds to the functional words a restricted set of “semi-lexical categories”: grammatical nouns like *one*, *self*, *thing*, *body*, *place*, *time*, *way*,¹⁰ *other(s)*, verbs like *be*, *see*, *have*, *come*, *go*, *say*, adjectives/adverbs like *other*, *same*, *different*, *mere*, *good*, *bad*, *well*, *such*, *so* and prepositions like *to*, *for*, *of*, *with*, *out*, *up*, *by*, *on* etc.—actually, the familiar prepositions are grammatical ones.

In the *Wake*, Joyce exploited the Dictionary’s productive categories. The young Beckett imitated him in this. But in the late texts Gontarski calls “‘closed space’ tales” (1996: x), Beckett’s vocabulary is drawn almost exclusively from the closed-class categories, grammatical nouns and verbs like those above, and bound morphemes, adding another dimension to their fragmentariness. Starting with *Comment C’est /How It Is*, it is the repertoire of the Syntacticon that is exploited in titles like *All That Fall*, *Pour Finir Encore*, *assez* or *Enough*, *sans* or *lessness*, *Still*, *All Strange Away*, *Stirrings Still*, *Come and Go* and *Ill Seen Ill Said* with its light verbs, *Pas moi* or *Not I* and *Quoi où* or *What Where* and *Worstward Ho*.¹¹

The late style captures the matter of the rip word: loss, lessness, the recognition that something was and no longer is, something that escapes the round of generations. It is not a syntax “obéissant au seul principe de la combinatoire d’éléments ayant rompu presque tout lien avec le réel”, as Pascale Casanova insists (1997: 170). It aims rather to

⁹ Beckett resorted to other devices for fragmenting the syntax, as in his suggestions for the staging of one *Text for Nothing*: “Curtain up on speechless author (A) still or moving or alternately. Silence broken by recorded voice (V) speaking opening of text. A takes over. Breaks down. V again. A again. So on. Till text completed piecemeal” (1995: xvi).

¹⁰ Emonds envisions tests for semi-lexical categories. For instance, these first seven proposed grammatical nouns can occur with some or all the quantifiers *no*, *some*, *any*, *every* to form pronouns, e.g., *somebody*. Hence, one could write them with a hyphen: e.g. *-body*.

¹¹ These titles contain some Dictionary members: *fall*, *stirrings*, *strange*, *finir*.

ill-say the ill-seen images,¹² themselves fleeting encounters with the real. Nor is the late style about nothing, but about something so difficult to seize because so slight that a lessness of meaning is required, without its being completely meaningless. Emonds’s theory of the lexicon suggests the nature of Beckett’s minimalism of meaning. The closed-class categories lack the more specified semantic content of Dictionary members, having only minimally meaningful syntactic features. They are semantically “light.”

To capture the images of a past, the late style resuscitates a pre-conquest, i.e., pre-French English, as if Beckett went leastward and backwards in language, discarding all the accretions to the original Germanic vocabulary. For the English Syntacticon consists of a core, primary vocabulary whose origin is mostly Watt’s “venerable Saxon words” (1953a:143). Beckett’s attention to the differences between French and English detected via these minimal terms—Emonds claims that in decades of research on English and French, he has found but one pair of grammatical morphemes that are exact translations: *just/juste*—is the result of the distanced examination of English as a foreign tongue via another foreign tongue by one who, like Mrs. Rooney in *All that Fall*, “use[s] none but the simplest words,” yet sometimes found her “way of speaking very . . . bizarre”, leading Mr. Rooney to conclude she “were struggling with a dead language.” (1984b:34) So its author discovers the mother tongue, returned as “scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine” (1964 7) is, like “our own poor dear Gaelic” (1984b: 34), a *langue perdue*, with the irreplaceability of the mother and Pim. It has, like the voice in *Company*, the same “Flat tone unchanged” of “[a] mother’s stooping over cradle” (1996: 34-5) or of the grandmother on the telephone in Proust, “as impalpable as a voice from the dead” (1957b 15), become not the familiar mother tongue but one language among others, unique and foreign.

This tattered syntax is especially concentrated in the prepositions, which straddle the open- and closed class categories.¹³ The class of prepositions is so restricted that school children memorize them, a task clearly impossible for nouns, adjectives and verbs. The epitaph so admired by the speaker of *First Love* contains the line “Hereunder lies the above who up below” (1974a: 12), a translation of “Ci-gît qui y échappa tant/ Qu’il n’en échappe que maintenant”, which the narrator claims “illustre un point de grammaire” (1970a 9-10), namely the clitic pro-forms for prepositional phrases “y” and “en,” part of “a Primer of higher French syntax”, Beckett’s letter of 28 December, 1938, calls the verse (2009a 648).

¹² The “ill seen” is “of necessity, ill said”, Gontarski says (1996: xxii).

¹³ One reason prepositions seem like a “small” category is that they play no role in derivational morphology, i.e., one can’t turn them into nouns or verbs.

The syntactic “fragments” of the late work are frequently prepositional phrases, as below:

Close it [the eye] for good and all and see her to death. Unremittent. In the shack. Over the stones. In the pastures. The haze. At the tomb. And back” (1996: 65).

No wall toward which or from. No table back towards which or further from. In the same place as when paced from wall to wall all places as the same (1995: 261).

Beckett foregrounds especially the intransitive directional prepositions, e.g. “He ran out [the door]” / “he moved forward”, on the analogy with intransitive verbs: “he forgot [the eggs]” / “he sneezed.”¹⁴ Prepositions have the syntactic features \pm LOCATION and \pm PATH. Prepositions of PATH further divide into those of approach, +GOAL (*to, on, toward, into, etc.*) and those of source, -GOAL (*from, off, out of, etc.*). The “light” meaning emerging from Beckett’s minimalism is that of a directionality or “path” without movement, heading in a lessward direction: “stirring still” ever less and less but always just short of nothing. “I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way.” (1995: 156)

Beckett explores the parametric variations between English and French, where each is unique. Even when a French borrowing provides a cognate, Beckett invariably avoids it, as in translating “rebrousser chemin” (1976: 28) by “turning back” (1995: 225) and not by “retrace one’s steps” and “pas question d’y remonter” (*Comment C’est* :10) by “no going back up there” (1964 8), thus emphasizing the specifically English behavior of the prepositions. The translations of *re-* by English prepositions emphasize the similarity of certain functional categories, even when one is a bound and the other a free morpheme. Beckett seemed to detect “the complementary distribution between post-verbal particles (intransitive prepositions) and the English verbal prefix *re-*”, for Keyser and Roper (1992) evidence *re-* is a preposition “incorporated into the verb”. Thus, “John shipped (off) his prizes” vs “John reshipped (*off) his prizes” and “You should write (down) the response” vs “You should rewrite (*down) the response”. If *re-* is a preposition, “these examples follow from only one particle P being permitted per verb, as exemplified in “*Please put down the cat out” (Emonds 2000: 80).

The preposition *on* and its inverse *back* are given special prominence by Beckett: “no way on, no way back” (1974b: 62). Beckett had written to Barney Rosset: “I can’t

¹⁴ Traditional grammar treated prepositions like *out, back, forward, backward[s]*, as “directional adverbs” and those like *on* in “he went on” as verb “particles”. A test for the particles is their ability to undergo “particle movement” with the verb’s complements: cf. “He went on further” with “He went further on” by contrast with transitive prepositions with their noun phrase complements: “He lay on the bed” / “*He lay the bed on”.

get on go on get back” (1996: xvi). As a post-verbal particle, *on* is intransitive and directional. Beckett gives it continual scrutiny. In the famous ending of *The Unnamable*—“you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (1958: 414) — “go on” is a translation of the original French “continuer”: “il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer” (1953b 213), where there is no preposition. But in the novel’s opening, Beckett uses the same “go on”—“before going any further, any further on,” (1958: 291)—to translate “avant d’aller plus loin, de l’avant” (1953b: 8). Here, in foregrounding two French prepositional combinations of “de” and “avant”—“avant de” and “de l’avant”—Beckett discovers the peculiarities of English *on*. His isolating it from the verb points ahead to his later uses of it in isolation. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett had translated the command “En avant!” (1952: 152) as “On!” (1954: 57), a use attested in the OED. That bare “on” appears amidst other prepositions in the opening of *Worstward Ho*: “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” (1996: 89). Gontarski calls this “On” “the brief sentence that becomes the novel’s refrain,” claiming it “is folded into the pun ‘so on.’” (xv). We hear also the *on* of idioms like “He went on [and on] at length about it,” with the meaning of speaking continuously, as in the Irishism “go on with you.”

The verb particle *on* has a little noted property of allowing only a quantifier phrase complement. The evidence is that it has to be a comparative: “He went a little further on” is well-formed, but not “*He went very far on”, “a little way on.” See also, “He went on a little way further” but not “on a little way”. This is not the case with other intransitive particles: “He went very far out, down, in/out, down, in very far”.

The directional prepositions meet the other functional category Beckett favors, the quantifiers, notably the quantifiers like “little” and “less” and the comparatives. Watt’s reflections on the inflections *-er*, *-est*, the bound counterparts of the free morphemes *more/most*, located in them the semantic lightness Beckett sought. From seeing himself “so little, so poor” Watt proceeds to “littler, poorer,” then wonders “Was not that something?” Then from feeling “So sick, so alone”, he feels “Sicker, aloner. Was not that something? As the comparative is something. Whether more than its positive or less. Whether less than its superlative or more” (1953a: 148).

Beckett’s analysis of the comparative conforms to Jean-Claude Milner’s distinction between two forms of comparative. In one, the adjective forms part of the comparison, e.g., “his fleece was [as] white as snow”. In the other, only the quantifier or degree word, i.e., the functional category, is involved. In it, the adjectives may be different—“John is as courageous as Bill is intelligent” (1973: 44). Nor would it be a contradiction to add, “that is to say, not at all” (1973 40). This comparative does not necessarily predicate the quality the adjective designates. So asserting Watt is sicker than before is not necessarily to assert he is sick but only that however sick he was before, he is more so now. This is semantic lightness, but, as Watt knew, it is not nothing. “Least never to be nought.” The goal is “With leasening words say least best worse” (1996 106).

The Unnamable had pronounced *merde*, “le mot juste” (1953b: 131), the word that for Beckett reduces all to the circulation of likes, generation to the “strides of alimentation and defecation” (1954: 29). *Less* replaces it: “With what one word convey its change? Careful. Less. Ah the sweet one word. Less. It is less. The same but less. . . . To say the least. Less. It will end by being no more. By never having been.” (1996 81) The transformation of shit into lessness, a Dictionary word into a syntacticon member, unburdens “le mot juste” of semantic specificity and exchanges its affect from derisory humor and the continuous flow of the Unnamable’s tears to the later prose’s “deterioration of the sense of humour” (1964: 18) and the staring eye’s brief and sudden tears, like the sudden showers of a “passing cloud” in “the blessed days of blue.” *Blessed* that contains *less*.

Since the image-memory, subject itself to time, becomes ever slighter, the language must adopt its dwindling direction: the lessward direction of Beckett’s comparatives.¹⁵ The traditional term for quantifiers, especially the comparatives—“degree word”—suggests a kind of directionality: positive, comparative, superlative. The superlative of the grammatical adjective *bad* meets the directional preposition in one of the rare neologisms of the late prose. For “worstward”, Beckett discovered the one preposition for which new members can be coined, the bound morpheme *-ward*. Examples include “westward, “backward,” “downward,” Chaucer’s “To Thebesward.” Beckett used “frescoward” in “Sanies I”.

Ill Seen Ill Said’s “sweet one word”, the quantifier *less*, is also a derivational morpheme, the suffix *-less* that, added to a noun, makes an adjective, as in “issueless”, “endless,” “timeless” in *Lessness* and “bootless” (1996: 100). Another derivational morpheme Beckett uses is *-ness*; it converts adjectives or quantifiers into abstract nouns—e.g., as in “flatness”. Beckett uses it in his parody of philosophical discourse in *Watt*, treating the proper nouns as adjectives: “For it was not the Tomness of Tom, the Dickness of Dick, the Harryness of Harry, however remarkable in themselves, that preoccupied Watt, for the moment, but their Tomness, their Dickness, their Harryness then, their then-Tomness, then-Dickness, then-Harryness” (1953a: 136).

The ending *-ness* is added productively to the morpheme *-less* to derive *-lessness* in “windowlessness” (1953a: 152), “meaninglessness” (1996: 45), “endlessness,” “changelessness.” So, although it is attested in the OED as a free morpheme,¹⁶ the title *Lessness* could be a bound morpheme ripped from one of the text’s abstract nouns.

¹⁵ Cf. Casanova 1995: 25.

¹⁶ OED, 1605, gives “lessness”: “1635 GILL, *Sacr. Philos.* 59. Otherwise there should be a greatnesse in being, and a lessenesse in working. 1889 MOULE *Secr. Prayer* v. (1890), 84 Cioran, however, claims it is “forgé par Beckett”, recounting how he and Beckett tried and failed to find a French equivalent, having to settle for “la misère métaphysique d’une préposition” of the original French title (Cioran 1976: 47). But the preposition has the “lessness” of Syntacticon items.

Alone, however, it contrasts strangely with the two words to which it is affixed in that text, marking that slight semantic difference between the two matters of Beckett’s work cleaving that text, that between the changelessness of the round of sames, and the change lessward—worstward—of the matter of the dead and gone, what Cioran calls a “mélange de privation et d’infini” (1976 47). Lessness provides the counter-evidence against changelessness.

So, with her “lit aslant by the last rays,” “Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. Last rays” (1996: 66), while the eye drops its sudden rain (67) from the tattered sky and the ancient voice its scraps for every tatter in her mortal dress.

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