

**BECKETT AT THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF *WORSTWARD HO* AND ITS FRENCH TRANSLATION**

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Alex Anderson

2016-2017 Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellow

University of Pennsylvania

Today I will be reading an excerpt from my honors thesis on the supposedly untranslatable work by Samuel Beckett called *Worstward Ho* and its translation into French by his friend Edith Fournier. Written in the early '80s, during what scholars have called his late period, this short minimalist text is somewhat of an anomaly in Beckett's oeuvre because it was one of the few pieces he was unable to personally render in a second language. He had built his career on creating a set of bilingual texts, translating between French and English or English and French, so it is surprising that after many years he reached an impasse. In this talk I will explore why Beckett had such difficulties and how Fournier's 1991 translation compares with the original. For expediency's sake I have jettisoned my full philosophical reading of the text—what I call a theory of phenomenological nominalism—and will instead focus on what it shows us. Though I still think it is important to consider what *Worstward Ho* means, it is more productive to examine the questions it raises about translatability, understanding, and sense and nonsense. I am, in other words, comparing the English original with its translation to investigate the limits of language.

I am well aware that this is an ambitious undertaking given the time constraints and fully expect that this talk will only scratch the surface of the complicated topic of untranslatability. I also anticipate the objection that my argument is not universalizable because I focus exclusively on a rather obscure text that seems to almost actively resist interpretation. *Worstward Ho*'s very nature is, however, what makes it such an appropriate case study for our investigation into the limits of language and representation. In the first section of my thesis, the one I decided to abbreviate here, I argued against the ontological reading Alain Badiou presents in his essay "Being, Existence, Thought" and claimed instead that Beckett's text is primarily concerned with the relationship between saying and seeing. Being is an important though not central part of the work because Beckett is most interested in the power of language—that is, the verbal—and how

it relates to the visual. I argued that naming necessitates existence and also that saying means seeing and vice versa. A being can only “be” if it is given a name, because that means it can be said, which means it can also be seen. So, seeing must be attached to being because, in recognizing the appearance of something, one must acknowledge the “there is” of its being. I then went on to discuss how hearing is equally tied to the expression of the verbal. I think the biggest mistake Badiou makes is that instead of examining *Worstward*’s rhythm he looks only at its thought, whereas the thing we really ought to pay attention to the “pulsation within the language” (HA 90). The audial in Beckett’s text especially plays an important role because the sounds of the words express something beyond thought. We must, in other words, not only look at the “meaning” of a work but also the affective impact it has. *Worstward Ho*, then, being both highly visual and highly audial is the perfect piece to study in translation because it illustrates how capturing sound *and* sense is necessary if one wants to produce a “good” translation.

Now I would like to turn to Edith Fournier’s translation of *Worstward Ho* as *Cap au pire*: Let me begin by saying her rendering of this difficult text into French is nothing short of remarkable. Rather than playing with the French onomatopoeic resources, she keeps the syntax close to the original and captures most of its meaning. What I hope to show now is that the most “linguistically involved” passages in English are hardest to interpret and thus to translate into French. They rely on words in such a way that makes translating both their sense *and* sound nearly impossible. What matters for me is maintaining the idea *and* the effect of the original.

The passages where sense is easiest to grasp are often descriptive—that is, those which use words to create an image. Take, for example, the scene where the body and place appear:

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A Place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. (NO 77)

Dire un corps. Où nul. Nul esprit. Ça au moins. Un lieu. Où nul. Pour le corps. Où être. Où bouger. D'où sortir. Où retourner. Non. Nulle sortie. Nul retour. Rien que là. Rester là. Là encore. Sans bouger. (CAP 7)

I think Fournier does a fine job here. She introduces the *corps* and *lieu* in the same staccato narrative voice as the original. The only noticeable omission is the second “Where none” (*Où nul*), which Beckett repeats a total of three times. Another interesting choice is the verb *bouger* (“to move”). In the English, the paragraph ends with the word “Still,” implying either no movement or an endurance. But, by choosing the phrase “*Sans bouger*,” Fournier echoes the earlier “*Où bouger*,” and implies a meaning the author may or may not have intended. For practical reasons, of course, she could not have used *encore*, since that word is her choice for the all-important “on.” I will circle back around to the implications of *encore* in a minute.

What happens, though, when the scene cannot be “seen”? I argue that when meaning is opaque, the aural—that is, the sound of the words—is brought to the fore. A translation, in turn, can either use the original work’s rhythm to clarify or obscure meaning. See, for example:

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worst. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worst. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. (*NO 90*)

Pire moindre. Plus pas concevable. Pire à défaut d'un meilleur moindre. Le meilleur moindre. Non. Néant le meilleur. Le meilleur pire. Non. Pas le meilleur pire. Néant pas le meilleur pire. Moins meilleur pire. Non. Le moins. Le moins meilleur pire. (CAP 41)

Although each sentence in the French has slightly more syllables than its English counterpart, the passage as a whole maintains a rhythm similar to the original. Of equal importance is that it captures the original’s sense. In both, the worse (*pire*) is held up against the best (*le meilleur*); they are taken to various lessening degrees (*moindre*); and, along the way, the combinations are assessed and negated. Fournier gets the translation right in part because she captures the idea behind the text and in part because she captures the sound. There are a lot of hard *s*, *w*, and *l*s in

the English, and the consonance in the French is similarly striking, though there are instead *p* and *m* sounds. What matters is not that the rhythm is identical but that there is some equivalency.

When neither sense nor sound is correctly rendered, however, the translation is lacking.

One such example comes at the end of the text, arguably the most difficult section of *Worstward*:

Somehow again and all in stare again. All at once as once. Better worse all. The three bowed down. The stare. The whole narrow void. (NO 98)

Tant mal que pis encore et tout dans l'écarquillé encore. Tout d'un seul coup comme jadis. Mieux plus mal tout. Les trois courbés. L'écarquillé. Le vide étroit tout entier. (CAP 60)

This scene describes the three shades bowed down before the “black hole mid-foreskull.” While the meaning of the English is quite clear, the French is myopic. The figures themselves (*Le trois courbés*) are clear, but their significance is not. Another problem is the use of *encore* for “again.” Though this is technically the right choice, it disrupts the consistency of the rest of *Cap au pire*, which uses *encore* for “on.” There was, of course, no easy solution for Fournier in this scenario, and we may point to it as an example of where the translator comes up against the language.

Returning to what I said earlier, so-called “linguistic involvement” complicates interlingual communication because “involved” passages work with either the sound or the structure of words to convey a meaning that is difficult to grasp—and thus render—in another language. The simplest form of linguistic involvement is rhyme. Along with the consonance and alliteration in the lines excerpted above, there are passages like: “Dim white and *hair* so *fair* that in the dim *light* dim *white*. . . . Now the two *right*” (NO 82; emphasis mine). But, beyond rhyme, for which equivalencies can sometimes be found, there are nuances in *Worstward Ho* that only readers of the English original will be able to appreciate. Beckett, for example, uses the similar-sounding “gnawing” and “naught.” The shades are pursuing the unreachable destination of

nothingness. They are, in other words, “gnawing to be naught.” Unfortunately, Fournier’s translation as “*Dévore l’envie d’être néant*” (CAP 61) does not quite capture the play on words.

Perhaps the most important verbal game Beckett plays is with “on,” its reverse, “no,” and the homonym “know.” If one were to hear *Worstward Ho* read aloud, she could very well think the central refrain is “knowhow on.” These permutations are directly related to the act of saying, because with “no,” we *see* on’s reverse, and with “know,” we *hear* “no.” There is also a certain power behind the monosyllabic command. See: “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” (NO 77). Indeed, Beckett asked his biographer how it was possible to write those opening lines in French without them losing their force (Knowlson 601). Fournier, trying her best, translated the paragraph as: “*Encore. Dire encore. Soit dit encore. Tant mal que pis encore. Jusqu’à plus mèche encore. Soit dit plus mèche encore*” (CAP 7). In the same essay I referenced earlier, Alain Badiou—who, we must remember, was working exclusively with *Cap au pire*—interpreted an “ethics of restarting.” Perhaps now it is clearer why: “On” signifies a beginning, but the French word *encore* could be taken as either a continuation or a repetition.

We should note too that in the English Beckett uses the verb “say” first as an active imperative, then as a passive imperative, and finally as a passive participle in the past tense. Fournier, however, does not differentiate between “Be said” and “Said,” using *Soit dit* for both. Anthony Cordingley has shown that Beckett had a very different idea of how to render “Said nohow on.” One of the pieces he uncovered in the archives at *l’Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine* in Caen, France is Beckett’s translation of that final line as “*Dire plus loin ne se peut*” (12), which is remarkable because the author introduces an imperative (*dire*) instead of using the past participle. It also proves that it was Fournier who brought the strange-sounding

mèche (“wick”) to the translation. If Beckett had had the time and strength to see the project he started through to its end, we would possibly have a very different version of *Cap au pire* today.

Cordingley even argues that Beckett may have translated the entire text. The IMEC archives prove the author worked on multiple passages, so it is not unreasonable to think he had gotten much farther than Knowlson led readers to believe in *Damned to Fame* (6). Cordingley also highlights Beckett’s decision to render “dim void” as “*l’ombre vide*” as possible evidence that a French rewrite of *Worstward* was underway (10). In the English, the adjective “dim” modifies the noun “void,” but in the French, dim’s translation as *l’ombre* (“shadow”) functions as a noun. What was a space of absence characterized by poor light becomes a space without light empty of all content. This distinction is hardly inconsequential, says Cordingley, because the identity of the void as a place gives *Worstward* a “technical and quasi-scientific discourse” that allows for metaphysical and ontological readings (9; my translation from the French).

If Beckett were indeed attempting a complete rewrite, this change would be understandable. But, while it is one thing for an author to make bold revisions, it is quite another for an external translator to take liberties with a text. The words “dim” and “void” are by no means interchangeable, and yet Fournier selects the phrase “*la pénombre vide*.” Like Beckett, she inverts the adjective-noun ordering of the original to fundamentally alter the meaning of the “dim void.” Here “dim” becomes the noun *la pénombre* (“twilight”), and the adjective *vide* modifies it. The void thus loses its identity as a space of being, and will instead be understood by readers of *Cap au pire* as the state of emptiness in the half-light of twilight (*pénombre*).

In a text where the nuances of language are everything, would a translator have had the authority—or the right—to make such a consequential decision? Cordingley thinks Beckett and Fournier likely collaborated, which would be in keeping with the author’s method of “collective

translation” (17), though that is not to say the two make identical translative choices. Perhaps the greatest argument against the theory of collaboration is the strikingly different strategies of negation Beckett and Fournier use to translate the lines in *Worstward*’s penultimate paragraph:

Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on. (*NO* 99)

[SB] *Moins ne se peut. Pire ne se peut. Néant ne se peut. Plus loin ne se peut.*

[EF] *Plus mèche moins. Plus mèche pire. Plus mèche néant. Plus mèche encore.*
(Cordingley 12)

Beckett proceeds by introducing either an adverb or a noun—“less,” “worst,” “nothingness,” “further”—before negating it with the phrase “*ne se peut*” (“cannot be”). Fournier does the opposite by beginning with the negation “*Plus mèche*” and placing the adverb or noun at the end. As mentioned above, the word “*mèche*” is one of *Cap*’s biggest idiosyncrasies. Cordingley argues that because it requires knowledge of the phrase “*il n’y a pas mèche de*,” Fournier’s translative choice is at the limit of understanding for many Francophones. He is quite right in saying that readers of *Worstward* will immediately pick up on the meaning of “nohow” (14), but I wonder if the same is true for readers of *Cap* when they come across “*Plus mèche encore*.”

Cordingley makes the case that Fournier included *mèche* in an attempt to double the “alienating effects” of the original’s lexicon (14). I respond by asking: Would most Anglophones feel alienated when reading a line like “Thenceless thitherless there”? (*NO* 80) Possibly, but in a way this seems like a false equivalency because “*il n’y a pas mèche de*” is not only obscure, but the noun *mèche* will likely confuse French readers when they come across “*Plus mèche encore*.” While *Worstward* does indeed require interpretative work, I think *Cap au pire* presumes a certain level of knowledge necessary to understand the linguistic games—and thus the sense—of the text. I do agree that if a translation is to be truly successful, it must capture the effect of the original, but if it hinders general comprehension, then an alternative strategy should be sought.

Movement between languages is, however, never an easy task. It is a balancing game that requires the translator to accept losses in some areas so that she may make gains in others. Fournier, in order to maintain sense, had to sacrifice the prosody of Beckett's original, which affected only parts of *Cap*, because in many passages saying means seeing, and translating an image is relatively easy. Translating an effect, though, is not so simple. I think it is those abstract passage where saying does not mean seeing—that is, where hearing comes in—that present the greatest challenge. But, since one cannot perfectly replicate linguistic involvement, the only recourse is to use the tools of the foreign, and this poses its own unique set of problems.

Antoine Berman writes in *The Experience of the Foreign* that to translate is to simultaneously serve two masters. On one hand, she has to be mindful of the original work, its author, and its language. If she tries to “lead the reader to the author,” she runs the risk of being a traitor in the eyes of her kin for not appropriating the work and making it distinctively her own. With this approach she can also insult the culture in which the original is situated, for it may feel robbed of something it considered “irreducibly its own” (3). The translator's second master is her own language. If she takes the opposite approach and tries to “lead the author to the reader,” she may very well betray the integrity of the foreign work. Every translator, then, is stuck between a rock and a hard place. No matter who is being “led” where, there will always be conflict.

Berman writes that all cultures, by their ethnocentric structure, oppose translations, and yet they all need it. The so-called “violence of cross-breeding” is unavoidable (3). In fact, Berman thinks this is, or ought to be, the “ethical aim” of translation. He believes—and I agree—that translation is either a “putting in touch with” or else it is nothing (4). We call translations “bad” only if they try to systematically negate the strangeness of a foreign work. *Cap au pire* hardly falls prey to this because, as we saw with Fournier's use of *mèche*, it tries to

capture the bizarreness of Beckett's original syntax. *Cap* is not so much a negation as it is a celebration of the original strangeness, though it does so with varying degrees of success.

Berman ultimately advocates a relentless struggle against our tendency towards reductionism and tells us we must “inhabit and defend Babel” (181). I wholeheartedly agree with his idea that we must grapple with and not dismiss all that is “Other,” but what is one to do with a text that is deeply entrenched in its original language? Moreover, what is one to do if the sense of a text is not universally agreed upon? My theory of radical phenomenological nominalism is just one of the many philosophical readings of *Worstward Ho*, so I am skeptical that proper *interlingual* communication is possible—which is to say, I question whether we can “inhabit and defend Babel” when we cannot even reach a consensus on the text's *intra*lingual meaning.

I do not, however, wish to end this talk on a defeatist note. By way of summary, we must remember that though Beckett was personally unable to render this short prose text in another language, someone else was able to accomplish the task he found impossible. The untranslatable, it turns out, was not really untranslatable, though that does not mean it was easily translated. I invite you to consider the supposed axiom Derrida discusses in his essay “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”: Nothing is translatable, and yet nothing is untranslatable (178). This is the fundamental problem of *Worstward Ho*: All that can be said in one language can be said in another, but it will undergo a change as it moves through the gap separating the two sides. Beckett's text, taken as a case study, is helpful because it demonstrates just how difficult it is to navigate this in-between space. The translator, faced with making this jump, has two difficult decisions to make: She must first interpret what the author means and then decide how best to say it. If she falters with either task, something will likely fall through the gap and be “lost.” In translation, then, nothing is ever unsayable, but everything cannot always be satisfactorily said.

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