

Rhythms in *Rockaby*: Ways of Approaching the Unknowable.

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I

Describing Samuel Beckett's later, and progressively shorter, pieces in a word is peculiarly difficult. The length of the average critical commentary on them testifies to this, and is due largely to an unravelling of compression in the interests of meaning: straightening out a tightly coiled spring in order to see how it is made. The analogy, while no more exact than any analogy, is useful at least in suggesting two things: the difficulty of the endeavour; and the feeling, while engaged in it, that it may be largely counterproductive. A straightened out spring, after all, is no longer a spring. Aware of the pitfalls I should nevertheless like, in this paper, to look at part of the mechanism while trying to keep its overall shape relatively intact.

The ideas in a Beckett play emerge, in general, from an initial image. A woman half-buried in a grass mound. A faintly spotlighted, endlessly talking mouth. Feet tracing a fixed, unvarying path. Concrete and intensely theatrical, the image is immediately graspable. Its force and effectiveness come, above all, from its simplicity. Described in this way Beckett's images sound arresting to the point of sensationalism. What effectively lowers the temperature while keeping the excitement generated by their originality is the simple fact that they cannot easily be made out. They are seen, certainly — but only just. In the dimmest possible light; the absolute minimum commensurate with sight.

What is initially seen is only then augmented or reinforced by what is said. And the same effect is discernible in dialogue as in image. Since obscuring devices are again in operation, what is hard to see is equally hard to hear. Beckett uses diminished resources of sound in the same way as he uses effectively dimmed light. The "footfalls" in the play of that name, for example, are not so much amplified as muffled. In *Not I* the first words are faintly spoken, only then becoming gradually (though not much) louder. And in *Rockaby* sound (the recorded voice; the rocking of the chair) eventually fades away. Yet Beckett's main obscuring devices are not backstage but up front; inherent in the writing. What most obscures 'meaning'

in *Not I*, for instance, is the fragmented incoherence of the speeches themselves, abetted by the speed at which they are delivered. In *Rockaby* the obscuring device is simpler, more radical: a repetition of phrases swathed in the most lulling of rhythms. Yet the meaning which can be disinterred from these rhythms (and considering the nature of the subject the word is not inappropriate) is entirely straightforward: a progress of the most orthodox kind.

This progress, as so often in Beckett, is a progress towards death. The Woman in the play is clearly nearing the end of the process. The cries of "More" which precede each of the four Sections into which Beckett divides his work are not, as one might suppose, the expression of a desire to go on living a little longer; to be allowed "more" time. They are, on the contrary, demands to proceed to a description of the next stage in the process of dying itself; demands, in a sense, for an acceleration of that process. Far from wishing to prolong life, the Woman seeks to get it over with as quickly as possible: a conclusion which seems supported by the way in which her descent into the rocker ("those arms *at last*") and her closing address to it ("rock her *off/stop* her eyes/*fuck* life") are expressed.¹) As dictated by the play's form, the demand made by the Woman is for her pre-recorded "Voice" to run through the various stages which have brought her to the chair. This suggests that the conclusion to be reached is not merely awaited but actively rehearsed. Moreover because the Woman, throughout, is actually in the chair (her descent into which is described in the Fourth Section) it becomes clear that the preceding three stages — from outside ("going to and fro") to inside ("at her window") to down ("rocker") — are not being gone through in fact as recapitulated or gone through in memory. The fourth stage, which she has reached — the penultimate stage in the sense that it immediately precedes being "rocked off" or dying — is thus a stage in which, while waiting, she recalls or asks to be taken through the events which have brought her here. Largely because she has nothing else to do; can, in fact, 'do' nothing at all.

I say the 'events' of the play: a word which might seem too overstated for anything that 'happens' within the severely marked limits which the playwright sets himself. But a remarkable feature of Beckett's work in general is the tension between the narrowness of these limits and the quite disproportionate intensity of what goes on within them. This twelve-page work of spare (because largely repeated) vocabulary is, on its scale, as complete a work of narrative power as one could contemplate, with as formidable a structure and as pronounced a beginning, middle and end. The 'events' are as severely circumscribed as those in *Not I* or *Footfalls* and are reinforced, structurally and theatrically, by the same sharp restrictions on light and movement. But within this ruthlessly pegged-out area the progress and development, the movement and activity are almost frantic. The word 'events' thus strikes me as wholly appropriate, and I will similarly use the word 'narrative' to

describe what actually 'happens' in the piece.

What precedes the process of dying is living: a truism — but in Beckett's hands a peculiarly scarifying one, since living is given such short shrift. The way in which he represents time as, paradoxically, both a monotonously prolonged and a startlingly contracted process is constant in his work from *Waiting for Godot* to *Not I* — the fifteen minutes of which represent, at one and the same time, a hideously expanded single moment and a frighteningly shrunken entire life. Something of the same paradoxical force holds here. The sheer length of existence is expressed in the repeated rhythms, with their suggestion of a lifetime of sameness; its momentary quality in the way in which the play's primary device (a 'recording') manages to encompass the lot, and where one stage can be made to slot into another at a word of command ("More"). The "long day" which ends in our being "rocked off" proves, on examination, to be a series of days which, however long they may seem ("*in the end/the day came/in the end came/close of a long day*") slip into each other while one waits. So that while, at the end of one such long day, the Woman realises that it's "time she stopped/going to and fro" (p. 435) and "went back in", "time she went and sat/at her window" (p. 437) that day in turn leads to another, in which a parallel realisation occurs: "time she stopped/sitting at her window", time she "went down" (pp. 439–40). The areas of living which concern Beckett here (like those in *Not I*, where seven lines take us from "birth" to "coming up to seventy") can be concentrated into stages of progressively diminishing mobility, all of which have a term or end which is signified, throughout, by the same unvarying formula: "*time she stopped*". In tracing the play's development it is the stages which bring the Woman to the chair — each having its term (or "time") and each, when that term is reached, giving way to the next stage in the sequence — which are our narrative 'markers'. Such a tracing, while difficult, is perfectly possible. Characteristically for this writer, it is also almost calculatedly counterproductive. First, the difficulty.

What chiefly obscures the otherwise quite precisely marked development of the piece is its intensely rhythmic nature. In *Not I* a development which is equally marked is similarly obscured by a verbal incoherence in which rhythmic repetition also plays a part. The examples of incoherence in *Not I* (the breaks, backtrackings, pickings up and losings of a narrative thread) admirably suggest the severe dislocation of personality which the particular situation presents. The language of *Rockaby* (where incoherence is perhaps too strong a term: muffling might be better) is similarly in tune with the situation presented. As the title implies, the lulling monotony of the words reflects the sustained rhythms of the chair which, throughout, is "rocking her off" to death. The "*Rock and voice together*" (p. 435) as Beckett's stage-direction precisely indicates, complement — even become — each other, just as the third element in the situation (the Woman in the chair) eventually becomes one with

the chair shortly before the final Fade Out. Here, however, rhythmic repetition has a further function — and one which clarifies as much as obscures. Each Section, as we have seen, describes one in a series of stages reached in the course of dying. This stage is described, in each case, at its term: at the point where the Woman realises that it is "time she stopped" the activity in question and moved on to the next stage in the process. Thus the First Section, broadly speaking, tells us that it is "time she stopped/going to and fro" (*ibid*) in the world outside; a preliminary to the action taken in the Second Section, where she "*went back in... saying to herself... time she stopped/going to and fro/time she went and sat/at her window*" (pp. 436-7). In the Third Section this development in turn gives way to the realisation that it is "time she stopped/sitting at her window" (p. 439) and moved on to the next stage which, in the Fourth and concluding Section, involves a relentlessly emphasised going "down": "*down the steep stair*" and "*down/right down/into the old rocker*" (p. 440). Isolated in this way the rhythmically repeated lines pinpoint the play's 'events' and indicate the nature of its development: a progressive contraction of the possibilities of movement open to the Woman (from broadly *outside* to narrowly *inside* to conclusively "right down") which focusses and ends in the "arms" of the rocker: an "embrace" (p. 433) which "rock(s) her off" (p. 442) to death.

Isolating the lines — while necessary in the interests of 'meaning' in one sense — could, in another, represent a violation of meaning. In context — and to some extent in the theatre, especially at a first hearing — the play's development may not be immediately apparent. What *is* immediately apparent is the overmastering presence of the rhythms in which these 'narrative' lines are cocooned or muffled. A further comparison with the theatrically more striking (not to say alarming) *Not I* may again make the point clearer. On close reading, the stages which Mouth undergoes can be traced and disentangled. In the theatre they cannot since they are, even more uncompromisingly than in *Rockaby*, obscured by repetitive incoherence and breakneck speed. And while patient unravelling of the chain may disclose a 'meaning' not immediately apparent in the theatre, the fact remains that it is the very incoherence (the chain in its original state) which is the total experience presented, and to that extent the 'meaning' presumably intended.

The rhythms in *Rockaby*, while they effectively enclose, or seal in, the narrative meaning discerned by isolating individual lines, also (however obscurely) reinforce it. They could hardly do otherwise, for if in a general sense 'style' and 'content' are one, in Beckett's case they seem even more indivisible than in most writers. Any examination of the way the rhythms in the play work on us will necessarily illuminate the meaning of what is being represented; said and shown. What should be remarked at the outset is, first, that the Woman's progress is dual, not single. And secondly that this progress is expressed through a series of movements which

prove, on examination, to be more in the nature of restrictions on movement: from an outer "going to and fro" to an inner sitting at a window to a part-willing, part-impelled descent into waiting wooden arms. What remains constant throughout these narrowings of the limits of mobility until shortly before the end of the play is a sustained search. A search, as the play almost obsessively reiterates, "for another".

II

At this point I would emphasise a peculiarity noted earlier. The strictness of the confines only heightens, by contrast, the intensity of what goes on within them. A narrowing of the range of movement gives those movements themselves, however minimal and restricted, a correspondingly increased nervous intensity. And the movements, although largely unconscious or reflex, are not altogether so. One of the basic tensions in a Beckett work is that between encroaching automatism and a residual personality. The most striking example here occurs in a production note for the 'Rock' of the chair. It is, we are told, "controlled mechanically without assistance from (the) W (oman)" (p. 434). While primarily a technical note for stage crew, director and actress this is also thematically relevant. When the Woman (presumably as a result of the conscious realisation that it is "time she stopped/sitting at the window") "*let(s) down the blind*" and *goes* "down/right down/into the old rocker/and *rocked/rocked*" (pp. 441-2) the verbs here still suggest at least a measure of conscious decision or control. In other words, like her mother (who similarly "sat and rocked/rocked", p. 440) the Woman rocks *herself*; *herself* produces, prolongs and controls the motion. And the moment when control ceases — when mechanism ("without assistance", to revert to Beckett's precisely phrased note, from the person in the chair) exclusively takes over — is in both cases virtually identical. In the case of the mother, who for so long controlled the motion ("*all the years/all in black/... sat and rocked*", (*ibid*) the moment when control ceased — when "rocker" (as person) was fused with or absorbed in "rocker" (as chair) — is precisely recorded:

"till her end came..... dead one day/no/night/dead one night/in the
rocker/in her best black/*head fallen/and the rocker rocking/rocking away*"
(*ibid*)

The passive representation of the "fallen" head, the continuing activity of the chair are striking. In the case of the Woman the situation is almost identical, the only difference being that the process, far from being a past event recalled or (to pun on the curious structural circumstance of the piece) 'recorded', is enacted before us while we watch; takes the duration of the play for its expression. Thus the moment when, like her mother before her, she consciously takes the steps which lead

her to the rocker, and rocks herself

"so in the end/close of a long day/*went down*... right down/into the
old rocker/those arms at last/*and rocked/rocked*" (pp. 440-41)

gives place, gradually, to that other moment: the moment when "rocker" (as chair) takes over. The process in this case is not so much said as seen. In production, in accordance with Beckett's notes, the light for the final Fade Out leaves a spot on the "face alone", whereupon the "Head *slowly sinks*, comes to rest" (p. 433): re-enacting, visually now, the verbal picture of mother, "head fallen", in the recorded dialogue.

This movement, it should be observed, is the only movement which the Woman actually makes in the course of performance, as distinct from all those past movements recalled or recorded by the detached, literally disembodied, Voice. Beckett is careful to insist that her "Attitude" throughout should be "*Completely still* till fade-out of chair. Then in light of spot head *slowly inclined*" (*ibid*). Regarding motion, as we do, as a sign of life, it is wholly characteristic of Beckett to undermine our assumptions by limiting the single *human* movement which occurs in performance to this involuntary declining of the head in death. A position whose uncompromising force is underlined by that pointed reference to the only other movement of any kind in the play: the "Slight, slow" Rock, which is "controlled mechanically *without assistance* from W (oman)". Everything else in the "Notes" leans the same way. The Woman's personal attributes, for instance — confined to accessories of costume which, however vicariously, might suggest personality, and therefore consciousness, and therefore control — have their actual inertia almost cruelly underlined by another production note: a note which indicates that even the "slight" impressions of movement on this predominantly "dark" stage where any light is "subdued" are produced not by the Woman herself but by the chair which propels her, outside her volition, into and out of that light:

"Costume. /Black lacy high-necked evening gown. Long sleeves. *Jet sequins to glitter when rocking*. Incongruous frivolous head-dress set askew with extravagant trimmings *to catch light when rocking*" (*ibid*).

Chuckles in the later Beckett are often of the chilliest kind. What other writer, one asks, would invest words like "frivolous", "extravagant" and "trimmings" with this kind of death's-head austerity?

The moment when vestigial control gives way to encroaching mechanism — when waning personality slips into reflex — is thus presented rather than described; visually rather than verbally expressed. Yet the earlier description of the mother's death ensures that the moment is already present in a form which, prefiguring the Woman's own death, compounds the universality of the experience. It also provides a measure of objective detachment to both offset and round off the more subjective, directly visual expression of dying which the play's overt action offers. It is a

similar compounding (or 'thickening') of the situation by the device of a detached commentary upon the action which the recorded Voice provides. And since the "Voice" and the "Woman" (separated for reasons of theatrical and thematic intensity) are nevertheless 'one', the play strikingly exemplifies that fusion of involvement and detachment which is a precondition for the production of art. A remarkable feature of the play, considering its brevity, is indeed its richly layered complexity of substance within the simplest, most austere of frameworks. Something which the enfolding, overlapping rhythms again augment.

The detachment especially repays observation, since it is achieved twice over. Broadly at first, through the device of a 'recording'. This manages to combine a choric function harking back to the birth of the drama with a technological brilliance entirely up to date. Secondly and more particularly, through making the mother's death ("head fallen") both a backward link with and a forward projection to the Woman's own ("head slowly inclined"). And there is more to it than that. Just as detachment (the strict separation of "*Woman in chair*" and "*Her recorded voice*", p. 435) is, at the same time, involvement (they are clearly 'one') so the "chair" and the "Woman in chair" — while clearly separate 'props' or components of the action — are finally fused. The chair — with its "*Rounding inward curving arms to suggest embrace*" (p. 433) holds, encloses, finally absorbs the Woman as it responds to her injunction to "rock her off" to death (p. 442). The image carries, in addition, associations of life: the enclosing arms of a mother rocking a child to sleep. Yet it is the fusion, again, of both pictures — the proliferation of imaginative associations — which gives the image its peculiar force. And since the Woman follows the route taken by her mother ("in the end went down... right down/into the old rocker/mother rocker/*where mother rocked*", p. 440) the two women themselves are similarly merged. Mother and child become one, just as both women fuse with "chair": the enclosing "arms" which receive them. The single most striking illustration of such fusion is the first mention of the rocker in Section Four. This is, from the start, verbally ambiguous. It is not, as one might expect, the obvious possessive form which Beckett chooses to use. Not "*mother's rocker*" (which would clearly indicate the separation of person from chair) but "*mother rocker*" (which emphasises the fusion). The Woman — descending into or finding the comforting embrace of the rocker ("those arms *at last*") — is thus returning, in death, to the embrace (and, even further back, to the body) where she started life. Chair and mother, as the phrase chosen precisely indicates, are one. At the same time, since the Woman is re-tracing, in her own person, a route formerly taken by her mother ("went down... into the old rocker... *where mother rocked*", *ibid*) she is also, in a sense, taking her mother's place; becoming her mother. In thus becoming "another" she is, at the end, achieving the objective which her entire journey in the play (her "going to and fro") represents a conscious search for. The culminating moments of this

sustained search are described in the Fourth Section in terms which, however odd they may sound, are indisputably clear in expression. The search for "another" which the play has obsessively chronicled ends in the realisation that the "other" in question is to be found only in herself:

"time she stopped...time she went down...time she went *right* down/
was *her own other/own other living soul*" (p. 441).

The notion of becoming "another" which we have seen exemplified in the way the Woman becomes her mother (itself a reflection of the way mother and chair, and by extension Woman and chair, become one) is part and parcel, again, of the play's development or narrative progress. The end — an absorption, even extinction, of separate identities ("mother-rocker-Woman-other-Woman-rocker-mother") — is explicit. To discover the precise way in which this recognition that it is "time she stopped" searching for "another", time she became "her own other" develops it will be necessary to return, briefly, to the beginning of the play.

III

The development traced hitherto has involved a progressive narrowing in the *area* and a corresponding reduction in the *scope* of the Woman's movements: from an *outer* "going to and fro" to a going "back *in*" and sitting "quiet at her window" to a final going "*down/right down/into* the old rocker" (p. 440). The final outcome of this progressive contraction — a *restriction* leading finally to a *cessation* of movement in death — is again explicit. Yet these movements (which, despite the narrowing of their scope or focus, do persist until they are subsumed in the chair's larger, all-embracing movement) are, as I have already suggested, directed to a specific end or object (the search for "another") which remains constant throughout. As first expressed in Section One, the Woman ("all eyes") seeks something which seems, even at this stage, peculiarly like a mirror-image of the seeker. She seeks, we are told, "for *another/another like herself/another creature like herself/a little like*" (p. 435). Yet it is the search ("*all eyes*") not the object of the search ("another") which at first seems inordinately emphasised by repetition. And it is the 'looking', 'seeking' aspect of the situation which ought first to engage our attention too.

The Woman's "Eyes", for which Beckett supplies a specific production note separate from that for the "Woman", are continually emphasised, not only in the Notes but in the text. Just as the disembodied Mouth in *Not I* is emphasised to the exclusion of the rest of the person so that she becomes entirely, as her name indicates, "Mouth", so are the eyes here the dominant, the single vital feature. The note for the whole "Woman", while touching upon her hair ("unkempt, grey") and hands ("White... holding ends of armrests") nevertheless focusses upon the eyes ("*Huge eyes* in white expressionless face") which, in the note devoted exclusively

to them, are described as follows:

"Now closed, now open in *unblinking gaze*. About equal proportions
Section I, *increasingly closed* 2 and 3, *closed for good* halfway through 4"
(p. 433).

The gradual closing of the eyes during the lifelong search for "another" is thus a further means of expressing the narrative 'line' undergone. The way in which this emphasis finds expression in the dialogue is less direct but equally unrelenting, and follows the same pattern of a wide open gaze in the early stages of the play ("*all eyes*", Section One) gradually closing by the end ("with *closed eyes/closing eyes/she* so long all eyes", Section Four). In all sections of the play where she is described as actively in control of her movements (in other words, when she is going "to and fro" or "sitting at her window": movements preparatory to the Fourth Section descent into the rocker, when her eyes start to "close for good") the search continues. The "gaze", as the production note has it, is "unblinking". This state of affairs is further expressed through a rhythmic formula which hardly varies: "all eyes/all sides/high and low". Thus she is represented in the First Section, for example, as "going to and fro/*all eyes/all sides/high and low*/for another/another like herself/another creature like herself" (p. 435). In the Second Section, after she has "*stopped*/going to and fro" (p. 437), gone back in and "sat/at her window/quiet at her window" (*ibid.*) the search "for another" (the 'eye' aspect) nevertheless continues. She has, for example, "*let up* the blind" (*ibid.*) for the purpose. The vantage point chosen, moreover ("*facing* other windows") is clearly adopted in the hope that the 'other' whom her "going to and fro" has not yet disclosed may even now materialise. She is still "all eyes", still searching

"all sides/high and low/for another/at her window/another like herself/
a little like/another living soul/one other living sou /at her window/
gone in like herself/gone back in" (*ibid.*).

Like the 'seeking' aspect of the situation, the progressive narrowing of the area in which the search takes place similarly goes on. Moreover, as the quotation shows, this contraction is not only experienced by the seeker but reflected in the situation of the sought. Clues that the 'other' she is seeking will eventually be found only in herself are thus implicit from the start, becoming fully explicit only in that final realisation in Section Four: "time she...*was her own other*" (p. 441). The very nature and direction of the successive movements undergone (contraction, not expansion; a going "*back in*" on herself, and a leaving of the outside world) rigidly plot the route to be taken. This spatial contraction — a restriction in the scope and area of her movements — is reflected, in an emotional sense, in a corresponding reduction of her expectations of finding "another": a steady erosion of hope which is as carefully structured and plotted as any other of the play's 'movements'. The resulting pathos (by the end considerable) has similarly been

implied or prepared for from the start, where the hope of finding "another like herself" is immediately qualified ("a *little* like", p. 435) as if the possibility already seems too extravagant; the likelihood doubtful in the extreme. In Sections One and Two the search and the hope (while, from the start, qualified) persist. By Section Four, as we shall see, both have been jettisoned.

The qualification just noted (the need for the other to be only "a *little* like" herself) is overshadowed by another, which dominates the first three sections of the play. This second qualification is expressed in the formula "when she said/to herself/*whom else*/time she stopped" (*ibid*). The italicised phrase — which virtually defines the absence from the situation of anyone other than herself — counterbalances the hope expressed, in tandem, for the appearance of "another". The juxtaposition not only has a cancelling out effect (which compounds the hopelessness of the situation) but, paradoxically, suggests dogged persistence even in the face of blankness and negation: another fusion characteristic of Beckett's entire *oeuvre*. The "saying to herself" formula persists until the moment in Section Four when enlightenment (of an again characteristically bleak sort) comes and, realising that she is "her *own* other", the Woman for the first time in the play rejects the formula; stops speaking "to herself" and addresses her remarks instead to the rocker:

"and rocked/rocked/saying to herself/*no/done with that/the rocker*....
saying to the rocker/rock her off/stop her eyes/fuck life" (p. 442).

The qualifications of Sections One and Two (like the persistence of the search) are thus, in Section Four, abandoned. In this connection it is the bridging Section Three which carries the greatest emotional charge of the play.

IV

The emotion involved — which might best be described as a yearning felt, even while experienced, to be fruitless — gradually builds through Sections One and Two. The search "for another like herself" is expressed more and more fully (in further, if still austere, detail) as the play goes on. Thus what defines itself, at first, as a longing for "another *creature* like herself" (p. 435) becomes the more emotive "another *living soul*/....going to and fro/*all eyes like herself*" (p. 436). That the sought should share identical features with the seeker, both physical ("all eyes like herself") and in activity ("going to and fro") does, of course, provide further clues to the nature, origin and end of the search. In this sense, as the area of the Woman's search shrinks or contracts, so naturally does that of the sought for 'other'. So that, having gone "back in", "let up the blind" and "sat/at her window" (p. 437), the search from this new and restricted vantage point becomes, now, a search for an exact reflection (identically contracted) of the seeker:

"all eyes....for *another*/at her window/another like herself/a little like/

another living soul/one other living soul/at her window/gone in like
 herself/gone back in/in the end/close of a long day/saying to herself/
 whom else/time she stopped" (*ibid*).

This occurs in the middle of Section Two and represents a very coherent (much fuller) account of that 'other', "like herself", who not only shares her physical characteristics but goes through stages of experience identical with her own. The search having been so narrowed — its vantage point restricted to what can be seen, through a window, of other windows — it comes as no surprise that the force of the feeling which fuels the search is intensified and quickened: a thematic reflection, again, of the structural singularity of Beckett's world, where confinement breeds a quite disproportionate (though logical) pressure of inner activity and emotion.

This stage also marks the beginning of that process of displacement (the move from *person*, or 'character' to *object* or 'mechanism') which culminates in the ascendancy of the rocker. The 'other' so sought for throughout Sections One and Two in *personal* terms ("a *creature* like herself", a "*living soul*") is, in Section Three, replaced by *sign* or symbol. The shift is prefigured by a subtle change in the formula through which the search has so far been expressed. Where, hitherto, the phrase denoting the search ("all eyes/all sides/high and low") is invariably followed by "for *another*", here it limits itself to (in a way satisfies itself with) "for a *blind up*": the mere sign which might indicate (one could not, in justice, phrase it more positively than that) the possible presence of "another". The 'other' herself (a 'person', however vague) is thus displaced by a sign or symbol which, in the absence of any more personal or direct manifestation, would be acceptable; would do. The diminishing of the object of the search from personal ("creature", "living soul") to impersonal ("blind") thus has the effect of further diminishing the Woman's own expectations. A narrowing, even further, of hope.

This more profound example of contraction is expressed in other ways. For instance, Section Two shows us the Woman (having "let up the blind") sitting at her "only window/facing other windows/other only windows" (*ibid*). This, while fairly blank as a prospect, isn't (at least in Beckett's terms) hopeless; is still, emotionally speaking, fairly neutral. By Section Three, however, it has become the much bleaker

"facing other windows/other only windows/all blinds down/never one up/
 hers alone up" (p. 438).

This also, incidentally, provides an instructive example of the way in which Beckett's rhythms work on us. Apparently unvarying they in fact progress, since embedded in the rhythmic repetitions which are each section's main substance is, generally, an added detail: a point of development or progress in the situation which charts the Woman's gradually growing recognition that the "other like herself" will have to be sought within, not outside herself at all. The apparently dispiriting fact that

hers is the only blind "up" does not, however, prevent the search from continuing. Doggedly, she is still "all eyes". So much so, indeed, that now — in a development of the image and the idea — they are "*famished eyes*" (p. 439): a phrase which suggests, simultaneously, a nearing of the end of the search and an almost ravenous increase in its intensity. The formula representing this "unblinking gaze" (the "all eyes/all sides/high and low" formula) while apparently rhythmically stable, is in fact undergoing subtle modification through the successive sections of both search and play. In the First (and shortest) Section, for instance, the formula occurs four times: the most frequent occurrence and (given the relative brevity of the section) the most rhythmic, most insistent and most inordinate in its emphasis. In the Second (slightly longer) Section it occurs only twice, so the emphasis (both less frequent and less intense) already establishes (along with Beckett's production notes for the "increasingly closed" eyes and the "gradually softer" Voice, pp. 433-4) the pattern of a more erratic, gradually failing search. In the again slightly longer Section Three (the emotional bridgehead of the play's 'events') while the formula as such occurs only twice, it is rhythmically and emotionally extended by the added detail of the "famished eyes" which not only the seeker but (changing in unvarying accordance with her own change) the sought for 'other' exhibits:

"famished eyes/*like hers*/to see/be seen" (p. 439).

The pattern established — of a search which waxes in intensity as it wanes in hope — here achieves its fullest possible expression before being, in Section Four, abandoned in favour of an almost obsessively emphasised downward movement (including, incidentally, the letting "down" of the previously "let up" blind): the descent into the waiting arms of the rocker. It is perfectly in keeping, therefore, that the "all eyes/all sides/high and low" formula which we have seen obsessively clung to throughout Section One, diminish in force during Section Two and achieve — in its extended form — a final flourish in Section Three, should in the longest Section of all (the closing Section Four) occur only once, and in a fragmented form which could suggest either disintegration or (as I would argue) a fluid merging of all apparently discrete bodies in one. The expression "all eyes" being no longer applicable to the changing situation — belonging rather to that past *approach* to death called 'living' than to this present and witnessed descent into dying — is significantly changed:

"right down/into the old rocker/those arms at last/and rocked/rocked/
with closed eyes/closing eyes/*she so long all eyes/famished eyes*/all sides/
high and low/to and fro/at her window/to see/be seen" (p. 441).

If this appears to envisage death as disintegration, a more thoughtful second glance will show it to be nothing of the kind. Linked with, rather than dis severed from life, it is more in the nature of a climactic merging: a consummation which (whe-

ther "devoutly" or not) is certainly seen as "wished". The obliteration of distinctions — the merging into each other of the separate stages undergone on the approach to this final descent, which is seen, now, as willed destination — is entirely logical; all as it should be. The passage quoted — where the human rhythms of the play (its spoken words) are dissolved in the overriding "rock" — is the nearest purely verbal approximation to the expressing of death that the play can offer. And it finally seems fitting that language — that 'living' but humanly limited rhythm which has, all along, existed merely in counterpoint to the more elemental "rock" — should finally succumb to it. Seeing death as positive is ultimately both a braver and a more plausible (because less partial) view of life.

Beckett's distinction, as always, is a paradoxical one. It lies both in the impossible objectives he sets himself and the surprising closeness to them that he achieves. He lives and writes, and the unnameable and the unknowable are nearer because of him.

Notes:

- 1) Samuel Beckett, *Rockaby* (*The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber and Faber, London, 1986), p. 442.

Subsequent page references are incorporated in the text of the present article. Except in the case of stage-directions, the italics throughout are my own.