

# Sailing Worstward: Samuel Beckett's Maritime Inheritance

Andrew Kincaid

## Abstract

Samul Beckett wrote to Barney Rosset, his New York publisher, that the title of his work, *Worstward Ho*, is a “play on Charles Kingsley's famous 1855 novel, *Westward Ho*.” *Westward Ho!* is a genuine swashbuckling affair. *Worstward Ho* is a minimalist, avant-garde piece. The two texts could not be further apart. Beyond Beckett's simple pun, what does it mean that he titled one of his books, a late masterpiece, after a seafaring romance? *Worstward Ho*, I argue, depends upon a genre of realism (the voyage and the quest) that is best represented by nautical fiction. Beckett steers the ship of literary modernism onto the rocks. How is maritime literature a precedent that drove him there?

Samuel Beckett is no writer of maritime fiction in the traditional sense. He doesn't write about life aboard ship or the experience of sailors. Nor does his own life revolve around the sea. And yet, one is never far from the ocean in Beckett's work. In fact, the sea appears consistently as a symbol and setting in many of his texts.



Figure 1 American Players Theatre, *Endgame* (2016). Americanplayers.org website image.

In *Endgame* (1954), when one collects all the various references to the ocean and its geography, one could conclude that Hamm and Clov are castaways, marooned on a distant shore, a desert island even.

From their liminal hovel, the two destitute characters look out to sea each day searching for signs of life. “Look at the sea,” Hamm suggests. “Look at the ocean!” And then, hopefully: “What? A sail? A fin? Smoke?”<sup>1</sup> But, to Hamm's disappointment, the sea is desolate. At various moments in the play, Clov holds a telescope in order to the better to view the horizon.

The same year as the play's initial performance, it should be noted, the US exploded its largest hydrogen bomb to date at its test site on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. “No gulls?” Hamm asks. “And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?” In vain, one last time, he inquires, “The waves, how are the waves?” Clov can only answer “Lead.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, seen through the lens of sea literature, the play's setting – a cramped room with two windows and a small cubby – resembles the interior of a ship. With Hamm acting like the bullying, half-crazed captain, ordering Hamm to bring this and do that, the possibility of mutiny remains ever present.



Figure 2 Castle Bravo nuclear blast on Bikini Atoll. Wikimedia Commons image.

In 1954, the same year as the first production of *Endgame*, the United States exploded its second series of nuclear bomb tests, code named Operation Castle, on Bikini Atoll. Beckett's sparse and desolate landscapes are eerily reminiscent of scenes such as the concrete encased fields of the original test sites.

In his prose, too, one notices the same dependence upon the ocean. In *Molloy*, the first novel of his so-called *Trilogy* written in the 1950s, the eponymous protagonist lives in a cave by the sea. On his meandering quest to return to his mother's house, he resides for a while on "a wild part of the coast," where he appears as no more than "a black speck in the great stretch of sand...jetsam...washed up by the storm."<sup>3</sup> Upon departing his littoral dwelling, Molloy is, unlike those earlier troglodytes in Plato's allegory, merely "richer in illusions."<sup>4</sup> *Malone Dies* concludes with the character Lemuel, a piratical parody of Swift's great mariner, drifting out to sea in a small boat, a bloody hatchet raised above his head. As he gazes at his motley crew of fellow escaped inmates, he vows never to "hit anyone any more."<sup>5</sup> As the narrative of *Malone Dies* wraps up, the grammar breaks down. Blank space opens up between the lines on the final pages, and the text trails off to an unpunctuated conclusion.

never anything

there

any more<sup>6</sup>

Have Lemuel and his makeshift sailors drowned? Or, has some kind of revolt taken place, both in plot and form?

For the most part, Beckett's sea is a modernist one. Each age constructs the ocean differently. For many of modernism's writers, such as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, as well as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, the sea was an unfathomable space. As the physical ocean became ever more industrialized (the transatlantic cable was laid in 1866), the sea in modernist literature came to play a



Figure 3 Runit Dome in the Marshall Islands. The dome encases radioactive waste from nuclear test explosions. Wikimedia Commons image.

compensatory role: a place of ambiguity and doubt. Beckett, too, goes down to the water in search of his own brand of existentialism. The sea's expanse, against which a solitary figure like Molloy is but a "speck," aids his depiction of subjects lost in space and time. Malone, having "shipped his oars," gets absorbed by the blankness of the page as he departs shore.<sup>7</sup> The Unnamable scans "the horizon", but nothing appears.<sup>8</sup> Beckett's aesthetics, therefore, need the ocean, the better to depict his particular portrait of the void.

What I have suggested so far is that Beckett's work relies heavily upon images of the sea. That is not surprising, perhaps, for an author who grew up in Dublin, a port city, in a small island nation. Beyond the oceanic symbolism in his texts, actual events from maritime history serve as a context for his traumatized characters. Beckett's famous apocalyptic landscapes – barren, empty, and silent – mirror the horrors of nuclear testing and radioactive fallout that hung over the Marshall Islands in the years following World War II. Are Hamm and Clov the last littoral residents of a doomed archipelago?

From all the aquatic detail that could be pulled from Beckett's oeuvre, however, one nautical literary allusion, a reference emphasized by the author himself, has long stood out to me as particularly suggestive. Surprisingly, it also pulls Beckett more directly into the tradition of maritime fiction.

In a letter written on December

16, 1982, to his American publisher, Barney Rosset, Beckett mentions that the title of his work, *Worstward Ho* (1983) is "a play on Charles Kingsley's famous novel *Westward Ho*."<sup>9</sup> (Kingsley's title has an exclamation point, but Beckett doesn't include that when citing the original in his letter.)

The immediate question that concerns me in this essay is why Beckett plays with the title of a well-known Victorian adventure and buccaneering novel when naming his own late modernist novella. Beckett's *Worstward Ho* lacks any meaningful plot, unlike Kingsley's swashbuckling maritime romp, which is full of intrigue, romance, and danger.

What activity does unfold in Beckett's prose is told by an unreliable and mysterious narrator. The thread of the story involves a description of three characters – a man, a child, and a woman – as they unfold from crouch-like positions. They then move tentatively away from the observer's vision, into a "dim void." From there, they slowly fade, though not completely, into the far distance, ending up at the "bounds of boundless" space.<sup>10</sup> The atmosphere of the short, 25-page piece, resembles a lightly drawn charcoal etching, or a soft, shuffling mime.

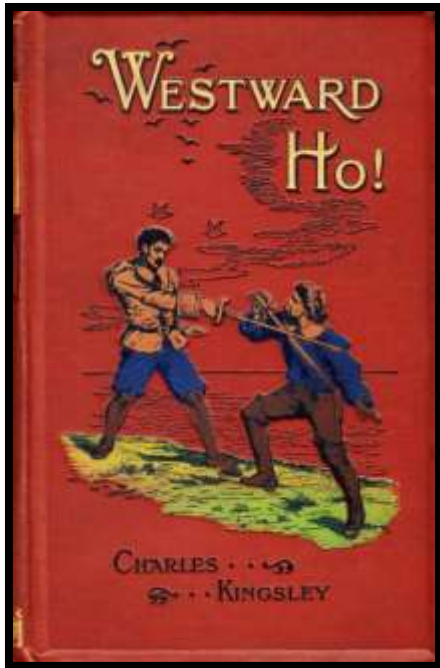


Figure 4 1899 edition of Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 5 *Westward Ho!* Classic Comics #14 . Wikimedia Commons image.



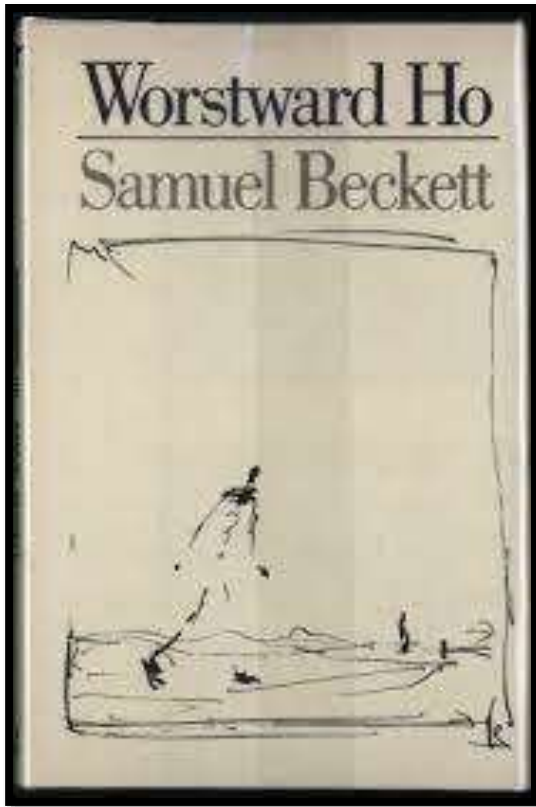


Figure 6 The original Grove Press edition (1983), the cover hinting at the void within.

Action, color, and dialog are suppressed. No names are mentioned. No pronouns are used. The opening words are an imperative: “On. Say on. Be said on.”<sup>11</sup> The command that the narrator makes of him or herself in those introductory words stirs syntax and wordplay more than it prompts any of the characters into action or decision making. Beckett, as mentioned, removes the exclamation point from Kingsley’s original title when constructing his own. His *Ho* drops, therefore, any claim to discovery or surprise. With little characterization or action with which to engage, words, like ripples or eddies, begin to fall in upon themselves. They develop minor differences – “Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.”<sup>12</sup> Diction repeats itself with a syllable, or a letter, altered. Alliterations abound, a symptom of language trying to find a way to “go on”, when becalmed. Verbs morph into nouns, and adverbs into adjectives.

Kingsley’s *West* turns, therefore, into Beckett’s *Worst* – a struggling, failing attempt to try to represent. Ellipses replace action. Beckett’s destination becomes an existential alternative to and critique of the gold and glory in Kingsley’s Victorian historical novel. The Caribbean high seas and pirate adventure get washed up on the rocks of Beckett’s fragmented prose. Realism becomes a shipwreck on the modernist shore.

Beckett rarely hints at other authors or their works in his titles. Alluding to Kingsley’s seems like a particularly unusual, though highly ironic, choice. Beckett’s original title for his text was *Better Worse*. His handwritten manuscript held at the University of Reading contains the following lines from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, “The worst is not so long as one can say / This is the worst.”<sup>13</sup> But something drew Beckett away from Shakespeare and toward Kingsley. It’s an odd move, for Kingsley’s novel is a militaristic fantasy. Beckett’s work is the opposite: slow, solipsistic, and uncertain. Kingsley’s book is sweeping in scale (from Devon to the Andes) and epic in time (from England’s Anglo-Saxon origins to its Tudor setting). Beckett’s plot is minimal, and the setting is claustrophobic. Two books could hardly be further apart.

Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) proves to be an interesting choice for Beckett to parody not least because of Kingsley’s commitment to the theory of evolution. Beckett, of course, famously interrogates metaphors of progress, replacing images of regeneration with those of stagnation and stillness. Kingsley, as well as being a clergyman and a historian, was also an interlocutor with and a promoter of Darwin. He also virulently opposed Catholicism. As a novelist, he is best known, apart from *Westward Ho!* (1855), for *The Water Babies* (1863), a staple novel of Protestant and British children’s literature. That text was written, in part, as a defense of Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* (1859), and it focuses on the role that the environment and nature play in shaping the individual.

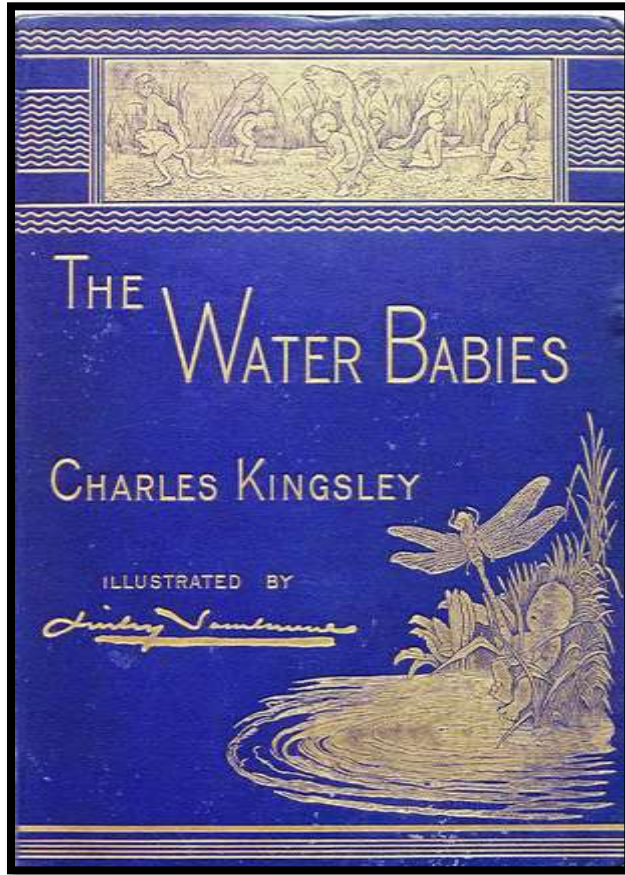


Figure 7 1885 edition of Kingsley's *Water Babies*.

The better to demonstrate British sea power and adventurism, Kingsley immerses the reader in *Westward Ho!* in the Tudor era, the moment when the Royal Navy was formally organized by Henry VIII. During his reign (1509-1547), and that of his daughter, Elizabeth I (1558-1603), the Admiralty grew in strength, gained control over the English Channel and the Irish Sea, and started to threaten the Spanish in the Caribbean and South Atlantic. Henry VIII holds the title, “Father of the English Navy,” and he turned the seven small warships that he inherited from his father, Henry VII, into a standing fleet of over two dozen warships, behind the flagship, the *Mary Rose*.

The plot of *The Water Babies* revolves around Tom, a chimney sweep, who is chased out of a home he is cleaning and forced to acknowledge his dirty nature. He cleans himself off in a river. But he drowns. Transformed into an eft, a young newt that sheds its skin, he sets about climbing back up the evolutionary ladder. He embarks on a series of adventures and lessons and is carried around the globe by the currents of the ocean and the rivers of the world. He repeats the evolution of mankind from watery origins back to human form. He becomes, by the end, “a great man of science” who “can plan railways, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns.”<sup>14</sup> *The Water Babies* depends upon the ability of a poor English boy to navigate the world’s waterways without interference. At sea, he can travel, take in, and comprehend the power of British values around the world; a working-class urchin, a chimney sweep, from the streets of London, finds rebirth and moral fortitude on the water. His voyages transform him into a moral and upright citizen, showing that maritime exploration can take the lowliest of its subjects and convert them into engineers and explorers. But it is in *Westward Ho!*, an historical novel, where the British sailor is first articulated by Kingsley.



Figure 8 *The Mary Rose*, launched in 1511, as pictured in the *Anthony Roll* (1540s)

Elizabeth continued her father's developments, with her reign culminating in the Armada of 1588, an English victory that ended Spanish monopolies over routes to the New World. Elizabeth also backed pirates and privateers, such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake, whose exploits in the Caribbean and South America further enhanced British sea power. In time, those former buccaneers received knighthoods and were promoted to Admirals. The pirates became the enforcers of state sovereignty.

These events – the voyages of Drake and Hawkins, the Anglo-Spanish War, and the conquest of Ireland – provide the backdrop for Kingsley's historical and imperialist fiction in *Westward Ho!* Beckett then exploits and satirizes Kingsley's title for his own purposes, namely, the pursuit of an aesthetics of exhaustion and the representation of journeys of failure. Kingsley's narrative sits firmly within a tradition of maritime realist literature, a tradition that has its roots in colonial expansion and that begins with the novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Beckett cites that maritime tradition in his early poem "Serena I," in which the narrator claims that "I was not born Defoe."<sup>15</sup> The realist novel and its technologies – plot, characterization, everyday language and names, and the rational ordering of time and place – come to one possible end in Beckett. The possibility for such an ending, however, can only be acknowledged within the limits of the tradition that is being rejected. Beckett's journey is not toward the west. Rather it sails toward the worst.

To appreciate the move from the westward to the westward, it's necessary to dwell a little longer on the plot and structure of Kingsley's novel, though I hope I have already provided a sense of its dogmatic tone and unyielding pace. *Westward Ho!* is, by its own standards, an historical romance set in Elizabethan times. It revolves around a blond English male hero, Amyas Leigh. The story follows the exploits of the sailor-soldier from his schooldays in Devon, through his first voyage and exploits in Ireland, to South America, and then to his final return to England, just in time to assist repelling the Spanish Armada. The novel opens in 1575 with a patriotic and military homage to "the men of Devon [Kingsley, too, was from that county], the Drakes and Hawkins, Gilberts and Raleighs, and a host of other forgotten worthies, whom we shall one day learn to honor as they deserve, and to whom England owes her commerce, her colonies, and her very existence."<sup>16</sup> Into this world of privateering and buoyant nationalism steps the young Amyas Leigh. On the docks one day, he welcomes a ship, captained by John Oxenham, back to port. In real life, Oxenham was the first non-Spanish European to cross the Panamanian isthmus. The crew in the novel, who had been away at sea for many months, regale those assembled quayside with their stories.

They present to the protagonist an ivory tusk engraved with a treasure map. On it are "cities and harbors, dragons and elephants...islands with apes and palm trees, each with its name over-written with, 'Here is gold!'"<sup>17</sup> The years pass, and, in good Victorian literary fashion (remember the novel was published in 1855, but it celebrates the early expanding empire of Elizabeth I), the reader learns of Amyas's wild and rebellious schooldays. When he comes of age, Leigh's first nautical expedition is with Sir Walter



Figure 9 A map of the English attack on the Spanish and Italian forces at Smerwick Harbour in 1580. Wikimedia Commons image.





Figure 10 A modern monument stands at the site of the Smerwick Harbor siege. Wikimedia Commons image.

Raleigh to Ireland. There, at the Battle of Smerwick Harbour, they defeat a joint Spanish-Italian invasion. Historically, in 1580, a Catholic force from Europe landed on the beaches of Kerry in order to assist the local rebellion that was being waged by the Earl of Desmond, Gerald Fitzgerald, against the confiscation by the English Crown of land held by the remaining Gaelic lords. Images Nine and Ten: A map of the English attack on the Spanish and Italian forces at Smerwick Harbour in 1580, and a modern monument that stands today at the site of siege. The novel's anti-Irish rhetoric is, of course, hyperbolic and crudely colonialist: "Ireland was England's vulnerable point" and the native Irish "hiding in the Kerry mountains" must be made a "terrible example of." Their rebel leader is a "savage among savages, a Papist among Papists."<sup>18</sup> When he tastes victory in Ireland, Amyas Leigh is hungry for more expansionist crusades: "Would that I could have one more adventure westward-ho!"<sup>19</sup>

He gets that chance, of course. Ireland is just an early staging post for the further adventures of Amyas Leigh. His voyages take him to the Amazon, the Andes, and to the Caribbean. In Ireland, the Spanish Commander, Don Guzman, who led the European invasion force has

been captured. He is transferred to England and held for ransom. Due to this rank, though an enemy, he maintains a degree of freedom. With that liberty, he charms and seduces Rose Salterne, the local beauty. "She had grown into so beautiful a girl of eighteen, that half of North Devon was mad about [her], and there was not a young gallant for ten miles round who would not have gone to Jerusalem to win her."<sup>20</sup> Don Guzman absconds with her to South America. Amyas Leigh, along with his brother, and a local motley crew form the "Order of the Rose," to bring the young woman safely home. While searching for her in foreign lands, Amyas falls in love with Ayancora, an Andean native, with whom he returns to England, just in time to confront the Armada in 1588. In the final, climactic scene of the novel, a sea battle, Leigh saves his own ship from crashing on a rock by jamming down the helm "with the strength of a bull."<sup>21</sup> He and his crew then watch the Spanish galleon slam into rocks and vanish forever beneath the waves. All this happens in the midst of an apocalyptic thunderstorm. A sudden flash of lightning turns the night into "a bright world of flame, and then a blank of utter darkness, against which stood out, glowing red-hot, every mast, and sail, and rock."<sup>22</sup> A bolt of lightning strikes the boat, and when he wakes on the shore, surrounded by his men, his most loyal servant, Salvation Yeo, is dead. Amyas himself has been blinded. He lives out his days, tended to by Ayancora, and vowing never again to return to sea.

*Westward Ho!* is the prime example of Kingsley's theory of "muscular Christianity." The Elizabethan period in which the novel is set represents for its author a time when men were neither uncompromised by mechanical routine, nor alienated by the Victorian business world. Written ostensibly for drumming up patriotic support and volunteers for the Crimean War, *Westward Ho!* is dedicated to Sir James Brooke, the so-called white Rajah of Sarawak, an English official into whom the



Figure 11 Sir James Brooke, soldier and adventurer, who founded the Raj of Sarawak in Borneo. He became infamous for suppressing piracy in the Malay archipelago.

House of Commons had to launch an inquiry. He was particularly brutal in suppressing piracy in the area under his jurisdiction in Malaysia.

Kingsley hopes the Elizabethan Age can serve as an example for the Victorian one. There is “not merely new intellectual freedom” in the earlier era, according to the omniscient narrator of *Westward Ho!*, but also “immense animal good spirits.”<sup>23</sup> From feudalism, England has inherited a sense of “fellow-feeling among the classes, along with chivalry, and the full sense of “free thought and enterprise.”<sup>24</sup> So maintains Kingsley, writing in the wake of nineteenth-century colonial expansion, historical realism, and British maritime confidence.

Beckett’s titular inheritance in his own *Worstward Ho* is further complicated by the fact that Kingsley’s novel is itself a nod to a John Webster and Thomas Dekker play. Yes, that Jacobean comedy, too, is called *Westward Ho!*, and it was first performed in 1604. Their title refers to the cries of water-taxi pilots who are seeking a fare on the Thames. To go upstream, away from the city, is to venture westward.

Downstream is to go east – “Eastward Ho!” Webster and Dekker’s play concerns the journey of a group of noble ladies who seek to rid themselves from their overbearing husbands for a few days. They plan a trip west, beyond the city walls. They shop as they make their way, for lace, shoes, and clothes (“to enlarge the bum” – the play satirizes trends in fashion).<sup>25</sup> They aim to remain in Brainford (Brentford, today). The women, including Mrs. Tenterhook, Mrs. Honeymaker, and Mrs. Wafer, are pursued by a group of gallants -- Mr. Goslin, Mr. Glowworm, Captain Whirlpool, and Mister Monopoly. The women tease and control the men. They lure those who would woo them; and then they shake them off. Male anxiety about female freedom and consumerism is a dominant theme in the play. The women seek pleasure, and though they engage in deception, they never actually consummate any of the potential sexual affairs that rumble throughout the plot. All the while, their husbands, consumed with jealousy, and upset by their wives’ spending habits, also give chase to their wives. The husbands travel in disguise. The play culminates when all the characters meet in a brothel. Identities are revealed, and honor is restored. Despite the Jacobean undertones of anarchy, violence, and sexual aggression that lie beneath the surface, the play does not conclude with any bloodletting or malice. Traditional order and morality are reinstated. Each spouse returns home with his or betrothed. Self-discipline wins the day. Those who were bankrupt, such as Justiniano, whose wife’s pursuit of the finer things in life sets the play in motion, find wealth. The open space of the suburbs,

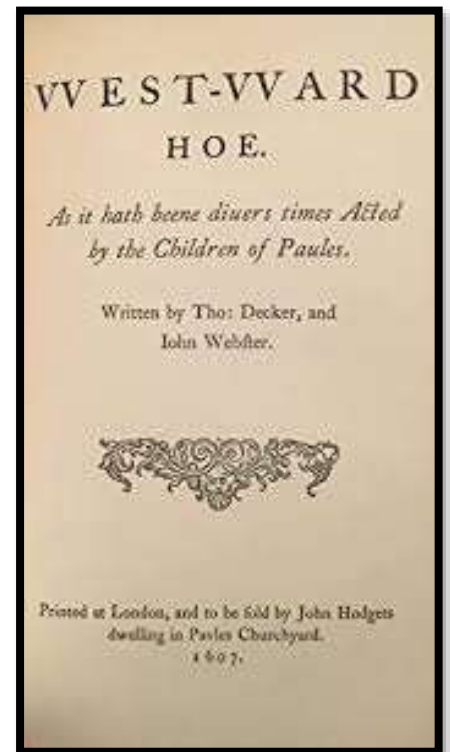


Figure 12 *Westward Ho* (1604), an early Jacobean play by Thomas Dekker and John Webster, that satirizes sexual morality and capitalist expansion.



which might offer some freedom for women from feudal arrangements, remains a dream for a future age.

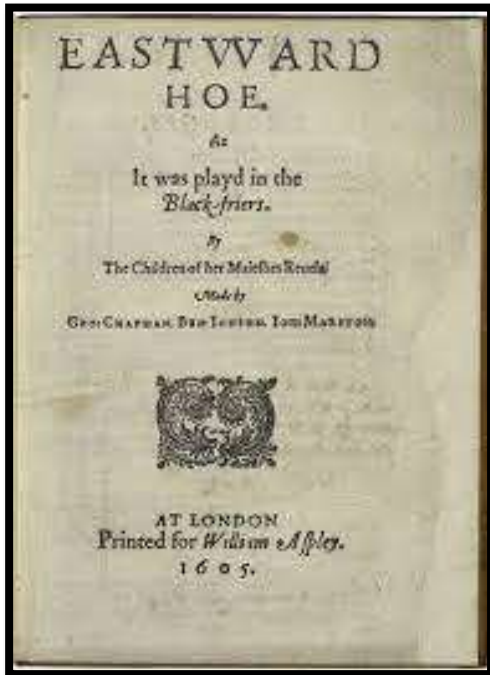


Figure 13 *Eastward Ho* (1605), by Ben Jonson, John Marston, and George Chapman, a play that satirizes King James, the first “Scottish” king of England.

A year after Dekker and Webster’s *Westward Ho*, Ben Jonson posted a rebuttal with the play, *Eastward Ho* (1605). That play revolves around a goldsmith, Touchstone, his daughters, and his apprentices. A suitor to one of his daughters, Sir Petronel Flash, seeks to steal her dowry and sail to Virginia. A year later, one more riposte, Webster and Dekker’s *Northward Ho!*, concluded a trilogy of “directional plays,” which dramatize the developing English capitalist order. The emerging economic systems, as each text shows, relied upon maritime trade, geographical expansion, and the regulation of gender.

Beckett’s text sits atop this long literary pedigree. He tells us that he knew of Kingsley’s novel; his letters make that clear. He wants us to be aware of the connection, to the point of explaining the pun to his editor. We can’t know whether Beckett was conscious of the lineage between Kingsley’s novel and the earlier Jacobean

title, but his work sits atop the genealogy, nonetheless. The shared title of all three works – Kingsley’s, Dekker and Jonson’s, and Beckett’s – creates a conscious and unconscious connection between historical moments and styles, a trajectory that takes us from the Elizabethan and Jacobean era to the Victorian, and then to Beckett’s own, the modern. It is not simply a pun, therefore, that Beckett is making when he jokes with Barney Rosset. Beckett’s own brand of modernism is forced into a dialectical engagement with literary modernity, which has its roots in the maritime world.

The most obvious element of nautical fiction identified by Kingsley’s title, and taken apart by Beckett, is a sense of direction and orientation -- the idea of the West. Kingsley’s work heads westward, toward conquest and the pursuit of heroic individualism. Beckett’s text leads to failure and the inadequacy of language. Rather than progressing through space, Beckett’s characters, who appear and move before the observing narrator, move hesitantly in a mysterious, dark place. The bodies of a man and a child “plod” “hand in hand.”<sup>26</sup> Then they recede. Then “sudden back.” The observing eye moves in and out, like a camera. “Sudden gone. Sudden back. Unchanged?...Yes. Say yes.”<sup>27</sup> Those characters who inhabit the text “come and go” in slow motion.<sup>28</sup> They inhabit a liminal landscape, between light and dark, between being observed and disappearing, and between presence and absence. Their path appears to be aimless, without direction or purpose. The liminal is a motif that appears time and time again in Beckett’s work. His poem “my way is in the sand flowing,”<sup>29</sup> like the

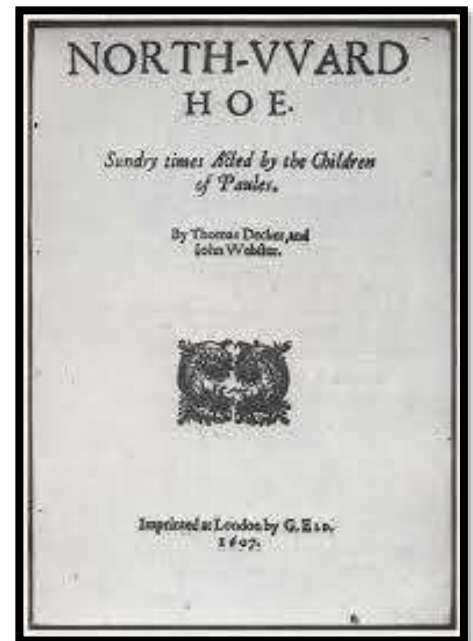


Figure 14 *Northward Ho* (1605), Dekker and Webster’s response to *Eastward Ho*, and sequel to *Westward Ho*.

play *Embers*, takes place at the littoral edge. *Worstward Ho*, too, takes place at the boundary of the void, in a mysterious medium at the edge of consciousness.

For Kingsley, all things lead westward: from England to Ireland, from the Caribbean to South America. Direction implies a destination, and a destination implies change. Change can lead to hope. Beckett, of course, famously asks his readers to ponder the implications of the idea of hope. Conditions, in the Beckettian world view, after all may not improve. To voyage west also carries a strong charge in western culture. The phrase has long been ideologically laden. It suggested promise and freedom in newly “discovered” territory. Beckett’s project seeks to bring the vision of such voyaging to a standstill, or almost to a standstill, for nothing in Beckett, despite the trajectory toward painterly stasis, ever quite reaches complete inertia. What motion remains in Beckett is not westward, but worstward. The narrator watches his characters “fade and return.”<sup>30</sup> By the end of the novella, the distance between the narrator and his creations appears to be “vast apart...at the bounds of boundless void,”<sup>31</sup> and yet no sense of accomplishment has been achieved. Each “progression” merely brings about more unknowing and more frustration. Each description, each gesture, becomes a struggle in finding the right word: “Enough to know no knowing. No knowing what it is the words it secretes say. No saying. No saying what it all is they somehow say.”<sup>32</sup> And then the book’s interrogation of self and world concludes: “Enough. Sudden enough. Sudden all far. No moved and sudden all far.”<sup>33</sup> The quest narrative, therefore, structures Beckett’s work, too. The inability of the narrator to frame the plot, along with the lethargy of the characters themselves, tries the patience of the reader. If voyage literature emerged to satisfy Europeans’ thirst for travel during the Age of Discovery, by the time we get to Beckett, there is no revelation, no glory, no utopia. The final image in the text is a common one for Beckett: a frozen tableau. The prose concludes, unsure of itself, not knowing where to go next or how to get there. The contradictory concluding lines combine the motifs of both travel and stagnancy: “Nowhow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on”<sup>34</sup>. Beckett, like all artists, is indebted to inherited forms, in this case the journey out and back, the nautical structure launched by Homer, and handed down through Defoe and Smollett, to Conrad, Melville, and Hemingway. But Beckett yearns to be free of the genre, with its demands of discovery, encounter, and transformation. But his characters are on a failing journey, an impossible voyage.



*Figure 15 An exploration of the concept of the void is at the heart of Beckett’s work. Of late, instances of linking Beckett’s vision of solitude to images of the ocean have appeared. A recent article by Matt Seidel in The Millions on Covid, social distancing, and Beckett leads with a vision of the ocean vastness.*

As much as Beckett wishes to reject the tradition of realism and verisimilitude, a lineage that has deep ties to maritime culture, he is also bound to that heredity. Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* features many of the dominant tropes, albeit in exaggerated form, which Beckett wishes to parody. For satire to work, however, the object of criticism must be recognized. While Beckett seeks to

outmaneuver realism, he can never outrun it completely. He aims to break with the Cartesian coordinates of orientation and situatedness, yet he highlights directionality in his title. In Kingsley’s



Figure 16 An upcoming conference On Beckett refers to the flow and eddies of his language through a picture of sand and mud in a retreating tide.

novel, England in the sixteenth century, then becoming Britain, looks westward. In Beckett, the narrator is lost in an unrecognizable space. Location is, as the title says, worsened: “The dim. Far and wide the same.”<sup>35</sup> Kingsley fills the sea, long a symbol of waste and emptiness, with flags and battles, and ships and action. Beckett drains that space to leave his unknowing narrator in a void of darkness: “The void. Before the staring eyes. Stare where they may.”<sup>36</sup> The unnamed narrator of *Worstward Ho* observes anxiously, like an extreme version of Conrad’s chronicler in *Heart of Darkness*, conjuring shapes out of the shadows.

Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* revolves around the heroics of Amyas Leigh, an apparently invincible English sailor. Leigh fights and plunders his way across continents

and seas. Despite his outlandish, over-the-top exploits, such as spending two years in the Amazonian jungle, he is but an exaggerated Robinson Crusoe – capable, decisive, pragmatic. With his obsessive search for treasure, he is also not unlike the monomaniacal Ahab (*Moby Dick* was published four years before *Westward Ho!*). By hitching *Worstward Ho*, titularly, to the tradition of the maritime adventure writing, Beckett can undo its ideological excesses. The legacy of Defoe, Conrad, and Melville is an oppressively masculine one. The main character observed by the narrator in *Worstward Ho*, by contrast, offers up a “worsened,” more washed-up version of the wizened old sailor. He sits with his “head sunk on [his] crippled hands...eyes clenched.”<sup>37</sup> The other characters in the text are also vulnerable. The child has his back “bowed.”<sup>38</sup> Together, they wander. But to where? Are they “in the narrow[s] vast?”<sup>39</sup> The narrator searches for them, then stares at them. But with little action, he runs out of material. “What seen? What said?”<sup>40</sup> But when it seems like there is nothing more to write about in this text, a slight adjustment, or a minor movement happens. A word might be altered slightly. This minute change allows for “somehow on.”<sup>41</sup> Beckett’s version of heroics, a persistence in the face of great darkness. The image of a woman tending a gravestone appears toward the end of the novella. The father and child pass her by, and they roam further, with a string of neologisms, into the “unmoreable unlessable unworseable evermost almost void”<sup>42</sup>. The observer-narrator watches them fade through a pinhole (a porthole?) into the “dimmost dim.” If Kingsley’s heroes, and those of his maritime forebears, fill the unknown world with their projections, if their paranoia propels their urge for control, then Beckett’s unmoored characters learn to exist differently. They struggle with unknowing, unsure of their destination. They voyage in darkness. They move seemingly without purpose. There is no pretension to grandeur, resolution, or catharsis. There is always tragedy at sea, but in Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* there is no tragic hero, no expiation of sin or guilt. There is barely a subject around whom heroism or tragedy could cohere. The heroic mariner, born of the Enlightenment, makes way for the directionless wanderer.

Modernism is defined by the unreliable narrator. Truth depends on the teller, and ideology depends on perspective. In maritime fiction, too, the shady narrator becomes the central figure. Seafaring stories are built upon danger and survival. Those stories are often recounted to others long



after the original events, such as in *Billy Budd*, for example. Much sea fiction is a version of “let me tell you about the one that got away”: something happened with few witnesses, and the tale and the rumors, merely grow. Should Conrad’s narrators be believed? Ishmael is our only witness to events aboard the *Pequod*. Jonah tells us that he lived in a whale for three days. A fishy story if ever there were one. Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* is told by an omniscient narrator, one who possesses an encyclopedic mind. Histories of England going back centuries are recounted. The narrator supplies geographic information, from Devon to Peru, as if he were Mercator. Everything, including the politics and the battles, is told with such confidence, and from the viewpoint of the English hero, that the reader cannot but be suspicious of the source. Indeed, the fact that Amyas Leigh is blinded at the end of the novel suggests that even the author doubts his clear-sightedness. Kingsley, perhaps, has taken that first half-step himself toward modernism’s uncertainty.

In *Worstward Ho*, Beckett’s narrator never seems in charge of his material. He is the worst! He tries to create, to tell. He orders his crew into action, like a bullying sea captain. “On. Say on,” are the first words of the story.<sup>43</sup> They are a command to imagination, to fiction’s imperative. “Say a body.”<sup>44</sup> But each order, and this is one of Beckett’s formalist devices, is immediately contradicted: “Say for be said. Missaid.” “Say a body. No mind.” “First the place. No. First both.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than a plot emerging – a series of events in which one causes the next – language itself becomes Beckett’s protagonist. Words eddy, repeat, form units, combine, retreat, and regroup. Language becomes the tide: “On back to unsay void can go. Void cannot go. Save dim go. Then all go. All not already gone.”<sup>46</sup> So untrustworthy are words that the narrator constantly coins new ones: “unlestening,” “unmoreable,” and “unnullable.”<sup>47</sup> Are these words nonsense, or are they required technical jargon? Has the narrator lost his mind, as many seamen and travelers have, or has he become such a specialist that that his argot is incomprehensible to the rest of us? Narrators of sea tales are prone to hyperbole, and Beckett’s parodying of the genre allows him to take the tradition of the novel, founded on watery origins, to its logical conclusion, one in which not just the reader, but the narrator himself comes to doubt the entire story. The story is just words. In sowing doubt about the entire enterprise, Beckett is able, by intertextually playing with Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!*, to undermine ideological faith in the Victorian and colonialist project of voyaging, as well as the tradition of realist fiction. In essence, Beckett is remaking the ocean, from a commercial one that facilitates transport, individualism, and colonialism, to a postcolonial sea, one in which expansion, heroics, and language are all thrown overboard.

Beckett’s working title for *Worstward Ho* was, we know from his notebooks, *Better Worse*. But his plans changed, and he moved to pun on Kingsley’s well-known work of maritime fiction. I have attempted to explore the reasons behind that decision, or, rather, given that we will never know Beckett’s reasons, my agenda has been to think about what the linkage enables. By hitching his wagon to nautical literature, Beckett acknowledges his literary heirs, Defoe, Swift, Smollett, Austen, and Conrad, each of whom required the ocean for their texts to work. It is at sea that modern subjectivity was initially tested and experimented upon. In maritime fiction, ideologies of gender – Odysseus sails, while Penelope stays – along with theories of capitalism, were solidified. (The fact that the days of sail are behind us, sea writing remains popular because of its experimental value. Pirate, experiment, and experience share the same etymological root). From heroism, through the unreliable narrator, to (dis)orientation in space and time, Beckett’s work depends upon realism, and, therefore, upon nautical culture. Embedded in the phrase *Worstward Ho* is Kingsley’s nineteenth-century celebration of Protestantism and masculinity, which was designed to stir up recruits for the Black Sea and Crimea. Also hidden in the title is the Elizabethan era, a time when the Royal Navy was founded, and England sought to govern the Atlantic. Among the play of titles, too, is Ben Jonson’s and Thomas Dekker’s play, and the world of Jacobean theater, with its gendered violence and internationalist expansion. Beckett’s

text contains a darkness, too. Has some violent tragedy occurred in *Worstward Ho*, forcing its characters to trek through the post-apocalyptic void?

The sea seeps into many of Beckett's texts, including *Embers*, *Endgame*, his poems, and the novel *Murphy*. Modernity's myths of freedom, truth, and courage can never be fully negated. Ideologies and forms are dialectical. We may not get heroic sailors in Beckett, nor tales of insight and discovery, but the traces of maritime fiction can be seen everywhere. What is repressed always returns. The ocean keeps reappearing in his work because it is emblematic of the tensions inherent in modern life itself. The sea, literally and metaphorically, embodies competing, sometimes irreconcilable, elements of cultural and individual experience: stasis and change, fear and possibility, labor and imagination, and presence and disappearance. As Beckett aims to create a literature of failure, a fiction sailing toward the worst, the sea cannot be held back. The modern world was made from conquering the ocean, and undoing modernity may lie in remaking the sea.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958), 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 281.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 281.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 280.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 384.

<sup>9</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Four Volumes* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2014), 597.

<sup>10</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *Worstward Ho*, in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ackerly, Chris, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 2004), 652.

<sup>14</sup> Kingsley, Charles, *The Water Babies* (Project Gutenberg), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1018>, 487.

<sup>15</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *Collected Poems* (London: Calder, 1999), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Kingsley, Charles, *Westward Ho!* (London: The Spencer Press, 1936), 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 621.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 556.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 295.

<sup>25</sup> Dowd, Michelle, "Leaning Too Hard Upon the Pen: Suburb Wenches and City Wives in *Westward Ho*," in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 15, (2002), 224-242 (p. 226).

<sup>26</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *Worstward Ho*, in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 93.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Beckett, Samuel, *Collected Poems* (London: Calder, 1999), 59.

<sup>30</sup> Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 94.

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- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 116.  
<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 104.  
<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 116.  
<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 116.  
<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 107.  
<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 97.  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 91.  
<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 114.  
<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 103.  
<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 105.  
<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 105.  
<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 113.  
<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 89.  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 89.  
<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 89.  
<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 97.  
<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 113.