Fiction as Composing Process: *How It Is*

Twenty years ago, shortly after the publication of *Comment c'est*, Hugh Kenner remarked that the novel "looks like a draft of itself, as *Endgame* feels like a rehearsal of itself; packets of language, set apart by spaces, like notes for paragraphs never to be composed, jotted down as some eternal voice dictates."¹ Others have observed that *How It Is* resembles a "rough draft" or "manuscript."² These descriptions are apt. The subject of the book is the composing process itself. The novel demonstrates how the romanticized joys of authorship border in fact on a schizophrenic tug-of-war within oneself, where every flash of inspiration is countered by a terrible realization that what one has just thought may be somehow inaccurate, ill-conceived, or spoken in a voice not one’s own.

Writing is for Samuel Beckett an excruciatingly arduous task, and he typically uses the personal challenges of this task as the raw material for his fiction.³ His first published story, "Assumption," is about the struggles of a hypersensitive young author who is suffering from writer's block. But it is in the trilogy that Beckett's preoccupation with the process of storytelling begins to subsume the story itself. The degree of his sensitivity to the mechanics of writing is demonstrated in this one astounding sentence from *Malone Dies*: "I hear the noise of my little finger as it glides over the paper and then that so different of the pencil following after."⁴ It would have seemed
that there was no place to go from here. But in How It Is (the immediacy of the title perhaps suggests the shift in focus), Beckett retreats from the page, or rather goes behind it, attempting to catch the flux of the writing process at the moment it is occurring. Here we read: "ballpoint at the ready on the alert for the least never long idle if nothing I invent must keep busy otherwise death." Of course Beckett is fictionalizing here as well. But whereas in Malone Dies the emphasis is on the writing situation (pencil, exercise-book, room, lighting, and so on), in How It Is the emphasis is only secondarily on the requisite situation, and primarily on the mental and imaginative operations of the writer himself as he composes. Beckett's remarkable sensitivity to the sound of the pencil moving across the paper in Malone Dies is matched in How It Is by an even more incredible sensitivity to his own process of turning the stuff of memory and imagination into words.

Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy, Tom Jones, Pale Fire, Lost in the Funhouse, Project for a Revolution in New York, and Malone Dies are all works of fiction about the problem of writing fiction. In this respect, How It Is belongs to the same genre. It differs from these other novels, however, in that it dramatizes the problem at a more primal stage. It is in a sense an Ur-novel. It is a published text that looks not so much like notes or manuscript or draft, but rather like something prior to the completion of a draft. It purports to document the process of writing a novel as it is occurring within the artist himself, to be a record of that series of miraculous moments when invention is busy transforming memories into words on the page. In particular, the many references to dark and light and the halting, laborious journeying through a primeval mud suggest a Genesis situation in which something—in this case a literary work—is being shaped out of the mud of one's own experience. The odd "stanzas" of the novel quite literally imitate the stumbling attempts to get started. And each stanza is composed of a series of phrases that draw attention to themselves as fragments of half-conceived, broken-off sentences. The pun in the original French title is revealing: this is truly how it is to begin.

How It Is dramatizes the dilemma within every writer be-
tween the chaos of the artist’s inspiration and the need to give form to that inspiration. “The problem,” says Peter Elbow, “is that editing goes on at the same time as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he’s doing while he’s in the middle of trying to do it.”

Beckett shows us more clearly than any other writer—and in this novel more clearly than in any of his other novels—the lonely struggle of all writing, which is characterized by an ongoing competition (I am aware of this as I conceive and revise this very sentence) played out inside the writer’s own skull, inside his “little chamber all bone-white” (p. 134). “I’m the brain,” says Beckett at one point, “of the two sounds distant still” (p. 89). The novel is in a sense a transcription of the struggle for dominance between the right hemisphere’s immediacy, its ability to work by way of images, and the left hemisphere’s logicality, its desire to organize and correct.

The innumerable allusions in How It Is to various stages of the writing process hint at a step-by-step procedure of writing. These allusions can be used to construct a schema that would account for the phases Beckett himself may go through in the difficult process of contriving a novel out of his own real-life images torturously disentangled from the past:

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The endlessly repeated phrase “vast tracts of time” suggests not only the frightening white page but also the faraway time
and space that have made up one's life but are lost altogether, or perhaps lodged as mere fragments in one's memory: "dear scraps recorded somewhere" (p. 25). Some form of the phrase "bits and scraps" is used nearly fifty times, and seems to signify the bits and scraps of one's memory as well as the composing process itself, which is the process of attempting to turn these fragments into "my life present formulation." These fragments are recoverable only as "images" or "scenes" (both words are repeated frequently) that fade in and fade out like the scenes of a film ("brief black and there we are again") or the staging of a scene of a play ("ABOVE the light goes on little scenes"). Sometimes these bits and scraps can be captured in jottings taken down in a notebook ("reread our notes"), and then through a process everywhere challenged by physical obstacles ("here something illegible in the folds") or mental lapses ("at evening with his face to the huge sun or his back I forget") transformed slowly, painfully into a work of fiction. The whole process is an inching forward out of obscurity into a precarious and perhaps specious semicoherence: "prior to the script the refinements difficult to describe just the broad lines on stop that family beyond my strength he floundered I floundered but little by little little by little" (p. 61). These words are an appropriate description of the building up of How It Is itself, which would seem to contain numerous vivid images and recollections of Beckett's own childhood and youth. Of course we can never be sure—and this is as it should be—where autobiography leaves off and fiction begins.

Invention in the novel is pitted against revision or the need to edit. One pole of the composing process is imagination or inspiration, described by Beckett as "these sudden blazes in the head" that the writer experiences as a sort of "spectacle" (p. 35). So too the indispensable sack, wherein the traveler keeps his provisions, suggests the scraps stored in the writer's memory. The other pole of the process is revision, or the writer's need to prune, to delete, or to make stern judgments on the products of his imagination. This second self is referred to when Beckett the creator wonders whether this other "might not with profit revise us by means for example of a pronounce-
ment" (p. 140). He is "the scribe sitting aloof" (p. 44) and the "me bending over me" (p. 133). The competition between these two poles of the composing process is analogous to the ongoing struggle for authority in the relationships between the narrator and Pim, Krim and Kram, and the more generalized "victim" and "tormentor." The endlessness of this repeated contest would seem to suggest that the best composition occurs when neither imagination nor revision gets the upper hand. Creativity is more than raw inspiration. But so too it is a great deal more than correctness and tripartite organization and finding a way to have done.

Beckett's text bears a striking resemblance to some of Janet Emig's experiments with "oral composition." Emig was able to capture something of the dynamics of composition by bringing together her students' produced texts with tape recordings of their oral comments on those texts as they were writing them.

It was all yellow and everything as you walk into this (ten-second pause) you know. It was yellow and orange. Could I hyphenate yellow and orange if I want? (writing) . . . It will make the construction better. I walked into a warm-looking yellow-and-orange dress shop on East Randolph.

Minus the punctuation and capitalization, this passage would look (and sound, if read aloud) a great deal like one of Beckett's stanzas in How It Is:

one day we'll set off again together and I saw us the curtains parted an instant something wrong there and I saw us darkly all this before the little tune oh long before helping each other on dropping with one accord and lying biding in each other's arms the time to set off again (P. 57)

Although Beckett says at one point in the book that his process is "unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection" (p. 70), there is, clearly, time for momentary reflection, and the reflection becomes part of the text itself. Emig suggests that a pause in the composition of a text is a moment of rest, a time for reconsideration before moving ahead;
Beckett's breaks in his text suggest the same sort of temporary slacking of creative energy. The passage from How It Is is clearly as "oral" as the passage from Emig. Only Beckett is not so kind as to italicize for us those words—if any at all—that have actually reached the page.

Furthermore, Emig makes the point that there is a recursive tendency to all writing, a journeying forward into the unknown, then a doubling back, then a journeying forward again. This tendency is apparent in both of the above passages, which reflect a hesitant, repetitive groping toward a description rather than being themselves finished descriptions. What we have in both cases is a sort of dialogue with the self, an unvocalized attempt at a particular phrasing followed by an unvocalized doubt as to the aptness of the proposed phrasing, and then a new formulation of the description. We watch as a statement is being worked toward, yet perhaps never fully realized. We are shown the struggle between alternate formulations: Is the shop "yellow" or "yellow and orange"? Are the speaker and Pim "lying" or "biding" in each other's arms? And note the shift in tense in each passage. Both at least theoretically have as their subject a past happening, but both also try to deal with a present verbal formulation of that past, and at the same time attempt (in the first instance) to point to a future possible formulation, or (in the second instance) to project a verbal formulation of a possible future happening. The handling of time is certainly one of the most difficult challenges in any writing, and Beckett's valiant efforts to break his narrative into a neat "before Pim with Pim after Pim" is everywhere undermined by the text's blurring of tense. The time of the story proper gets confused with the time of the telling of the story. "All my fault lack of attention want of memory," admits Beckett, "the various times mixed up in my head all the various times before during after vast tracts of time" (p. 107).

How It Is is filled with reachings back into time and forward into the text, but these sudden bursts of inspiration are continually interrupted by Beckett's desire to approve or disapprove what he has just thought to himself. Runs of more than several words are rare: "this voice ten words fifteen words long
silence ten words fifteen words long silence long solitude” (p. 126). The subjective, personal voice of inspiration is repeatedly broken off by the objective, impersonal commentary of the reviser. Phrases such as the following occur throughout: “something wrong there” (which appears twenty-four times in the novel), “need then to emend what has just been said,” “nothing to emend there,” “not an iota to be changed in this description,” “not right,” “correct,” “a mistake,” “drivel drivel,” “no point skip,” “all hangs together,” “no objection,” and “a little less of to be present past future and conditional.” Even phrases such as “the sack we’re talking of the sack” would seem to be the author’s objective self calling him back to the subject (and the writing task) literally at hand. As in all composing, these dogmatic interjections have at least the potential effect of crushing the tender shoots of authorial inspiration; and the response of Beckett’s reader must be much the same, for one’s attention is thus repeatedly yanked away from the immediate subject and redirected toward a choice between a hypothetically better or worse verbal formulation of that subject.

The drama of this struggle between inspiration and revision is literally found on every page of How It Is. An alternate word or phrase is repeatedly substituted for another without the deletion of the initial formulation: “I’ll describe it it will be described” (p. 27), “midnight no two in the morning” (p. 44), “I am right I was right” (p. 55), “happy no unhappy” (p. 97), “a cry nay a sigh” (p. 143). These substitutions and the inclusion of internal reactions to words that have just happened in the mind account for much of the peculiarity of the style of this novel: “happiness one hesitates to use those awful syllables” (p. 25); “a fine image fine I mean in movement and colour” (p. 27); and “tormenter or victim these words too strong” (p. 115). Gradually, in the course of the novel, this pre-textual debate between imagination and revision becomes ever sharper. The interior composing process is by definition a divided one, and at times the supposed author is trapped between two equally demanding urges: the phrase “I hear yes then no” occurs repeatedly. And as the vivid images of part one begin to fade,
"yes" and "no" appear more often. There is an increasingly frustrating split within the author's own head. His desperate attempts to make his story neat and certain only feed his anxiety, and in the final pages of the book the composing process has diminished to a schizophrenic shouting match between the inspirational "YES" and the editorial "NO."

Often whole stanzas are based on a reproduction of the process of an as-yet-unformulated thought as it lurches through the mind. And Beckett will not oversimplify this process:

as I hear it and murmur in the mud that I hoist myself if I may say so a little forward to feel the skull it's bald no delete the face it's preferable mass of hairs all white to the feel that clinches it he's a little old man we're two little old men something wrong there (P. 54)

Of course the absence of punctuation and the minimalization of grammatical connectives enable us to track the evolution of this thought without being reminded that what we are reading is in fact written discourse. So too the lack of punctuation permits the running-together of the supposed speaker's description of a present-tense movement, the speaker's interior weighing of the validity of his sensations, and the supposed author's questioning of his own process on writing about both of these. Thus the description "I hoist myself a little forward to feel the skull" is interrupted both by the speaker's interior reactions ("it's bald" and "that clinches it he's a little old man") and by the author's interior reactions ("no delete," "it's preferable," and "something wrong there"). But Beckett deliberately wants to blur these two different sorts of comments on the described actions in order to fuse the process of the story with the process of telling the story. Indeed, he suggests they are one and the same. Hoisting a little forward in the primeval mud is equivalent to formulating a murmur out of the inchoate mass of one's memory. The staggering, uncertain movement of Beckett's syntax reproduces both. And something is dreadfully wrong in either case.
Beckett in *How It Is* probes yet further into the nature of the composing process. Part of the ongoing struggle between an author’s sudden blazes of inspiration and his need to give form to that inspiration is the problem of *voice* in writing. Discovering the voice of his own inspiration is one difficulty for the author; but perhaps more difficult is the delicate job of transcribing his inner voice into words which manage to express the sound of that inspiration. Thus “voice” can mean either inspiration (for the writer) or the rhetorical form which captures this inspiration convincingly (for the reader)—Beckett uses the word in both senses. And references to voice increase as he works his way through *How It Is*, suggesting that this dual problem becomes gradually more important. Implicit in the novel are the following very real questions: Is voice an individualized characteristic of an author’s writing or somehow programmed into him by “the voice of us all”? Does an author have one or many voices? And more particularly, is it possible for voice to rise above what Elbow calls “the habit of compulsive, premature editing,” which can interfere with the writer’s attempts to get his own consciousness onto the page?18

Although not every writer is as self-conscious about this matter as Beckett is, the presence of voice in a text is of critical importance to all writers and all readers. It marks the difference between what Richard Lanham calls the “monotone haste that swallows prose like castor oil” and prose that takes on a life, that has a rhythm and an identifiable tone, that creates a more or less distinct impression of someone speaking.19 Of course, voice in written discourse is nothing more than the arrangement of words in such a way as to give the effect of such a presence, and Beckett understands this: “my voice so many words strung together” (p. 95). But words and phrases can be strung together like beads on a string, in which case there is no voice but only words; or words and phrases can be placed in such positions that they do in fact give the impression of someone speaking. And *How It Is* is a text that reads for the most part “almost mechanically at least where words involved” (p. 64). The majority of the book is composed in a phrase-plus-phrase-plus-phrase fashion that sounds as if it were written not by an
author but by a computer. Sporadically, however, such voiceless prose gives way to a momentary colloquialism that must have been spoken by a human being. Beckett's novel is in effect a demonstration of the irrepressibility of his own authorial voice.

A good example of the mechanical laying down of words is the following stanza, which itself seems to allude to the labor of composition.

The lack of punctuation, the verbal and phrasal disconnectedness, and the piling up of academic polysyllables never permit this prose to rise above an uninflected monotone. There is no voice here. And most of the novel sounds like this. But once in a while, such voiceless prose is interrupted or overcome by a decidedly human phraseology that carries with it an undeniable rhythm and tone: "the word we're talking of words I have some still" (p. 26); "I always say when a man's name is Pim he hasn't the right" (p. 59); "the Boms sir you don't know the Boms sir" (p. 60); "Krim says his number's up so is mine" (p. 81); and "that wasn't how it was no not at all" (p. 144). The dependence in these excerpts on monosyllables, personal pronouns, and contractions moves the prose into a greater informality and allows a human inflection to emerge in spite of the absence of punctuation. Indeed, Beckett demonstrates that such conventional signals are helpful but not absolutely necessary in creating voice in written discourse.

Not infrequently Beckett within a single stanza allows his computerized style to give way, unexpectedly, to the sound of a real human voice. The following is an example. And note that the passage itself is at least in part about voice.

blue the eyes I see them old stone perhaps our new daylight lamps it's possible I agree and in the head the dark and friend I agree but this voice the voice of all what voice I hear none and who all damn it I'm the thirteenth generation (P. 83)
Beckett’s eyes are in fact blue, and he would seem here to be looking—or imagining that he is looking—at himself. But the personalized subject opens with a voiceless multiplication of phrases that by this point in the text has become the norm, typically introduces perceptual options by way of a “perhaps” and an “it’s possible,” and then seems to permit a response to itself in the form of an “I agree” and a “friend I agree.” But who is this friend? And who is doing the agreeing? And in this bifurcated context, the reference to the “voice of all” seems oddly wrong, for we would seem to be already in the presence of at least two voices. Suddenly, however, as if demanding to be heard, as if reasserting itself over both the voiceless text and the confusion of voices above, there booms an angry “damn it I’m the thirteenth generation.” Is this the superior Krim? Is this the unnamed speaker emerging momentarily from all his words? Is this Beckett parodying himself? In any case, we listen as a voiceless text begins first to fragment into a schizophrenic conflict with itself, and is then overcome by an unmistakably singular voice—not of some generalized “all” but of an individual defending his inherited right to his presence in the book. And his right to his own voice. Not surprisingly, How It Is concludes with a final assertion of the importance of voice: “only me in any case,” admits Beckett, and “my voice yes mine yes not another’s no mine alone yes” (p. 146). The author’s personal voice has in a sense survived the struggle to create.

Beckett’s novel is thus a brave attempt to bring onto the page the creative process, a process that remains most mysterious. He has of course fictionalized this process. How It Is is a novel and not necessarily a documentary of his own creative process. The repeated objections that there is “something wrong there” are fictionalized objections to something Beckett has himself written quite self-consciously. So too the search for a voice is a drama Beckett has intentionally built into his novel. Nevertheless, a glance at the original manuscript and first and second typescripts of How It Is would suggest that in the process of writing about the composing process, Beckett was in fact doing the same kind of things he has used as the stuff of his fiction.

One of the most interesting aspects of the material behind the final version of How It Is is the fact that Beckett worked increas-
ingly hard to give his novel the look of unfinishedness, or, more accurately, the look of something scarcely begun. The first scrap of *Comment c'est*—a two-and-a-half-page fragment entitled “L’Image”—was published in November 1959, and the solid mass of text lends its pages at least the superficial appearance of traditional fiction. But five months later, in a manuscript dated May 1960, Beckett abandons capitalization and punctuation altogether; and only a few months after this, in the first several pages of the English version, published in the *Evergreen Review* (Beckett was at this time writing in French and English simultaneously), the text is broken into stanzas for the first time. Although it is not my purpose to trace the evolution of Beckett’s English text, it is worth noting that the idea of a novel that pretends to be only a fragmented, internal record of the beginning of a novel was something that seems to have come to Beckett as he was in fact struggling to begin. In March 1960, in the very early stages of this new and difficult composition, when sending John Calder a piece of it in English, he referred to the enclosed material as a “work in regress.” That is how it was. Quite literally, Beckett’s progression forward into this new novel was turning out to be a regression backward into the composing process.

Indeed, his efforts to prevent the text of *How It Is* from assuming the appearance of a conventionally printed text continued right down to the final stages of publication. The French *Comment c’est* had included many stanzas that look like stolid, rectangular units of type, their last lines running all the way to the right-hand margin; Beckett clearly wanted to avoid this effect of finality and certainty in the English version of his novel. On one page of the galley proofs for the Grove Press edition, he wrote a note to his printers: “If this comes at foot of page it will have to be changed, on principle that last line of page must always be incomplete or carried forward by hyphen to following page.” But the convention-minded typesetters persisted, and on one sheet of the London page proofs, Beckett wrote with understandable impatience, “As indicated on galley proofs, there must never be a full line at foot of page,” and went on to show the printers exactly how he wanted the line
set, indicating that the "same mistake" occurred on eight other pages. In retrospect these typographical quibbles seem quite humorous, but for Beckett at the time the need to publish a text that would appear more fragmented, even less finished, than the original French version must have become almost an obsession. His sense of his novel had evolved, and he wanted his current notion of it to be reflected in the published English text. Ultimately, Beckett had his way. In numerous places in both the New York and London editions, it is clear that the typesetters have added space to a line so as to avoid having the last line of a stanza end at the right margin. And the author must have taken exquisite delight in discovering that on page 22 the final word of the stanza, "bottom," had to be hyphenated so as to bring its second syllable to the top of page 23, where "tom" stands alone.

In a nice phrase—"the fragility of euphoria" (p. 38)—Beckett captures the idea behind How It Is.26 Writing—like living—is a tentative, precarious, and certainly most difficult task. Moreover, the precariousness of any attempt to transform a thought or image into words is intimately connected with the precariousness of one's own being. The pangs of composition are the pangs of existence. Even the comparatively vivid images of part one are qualified by such phrases as "if I may believe the colours" (p. 29), "that must have lasted a good moment" (p. 31), and "I wait for us perhaps to come back" (p. 32). One's past is fleeting at best. One's future is hypothetical. In truth only the present exists for the writer as writer and the writer as human being. At the beginning of part three, Beckett mentions "the humming-bird known as the passing moment" (p. 103). The moment. The voice. The text. That is all there is.


5. *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 81. Subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition and will be included within the text.


8. This phrase appears frequently; see "my composition" (p. 52), "script" (pp. 61 and 69), "monologue" (p. 79), "recordings" (p. 107), "scriptions" (p. 112), and "narrations" (p. 139).

9. Beckett even jokes about the exercise-books of various colors that he typically uses for his actual composing: "blue yellow and red respectively simple once you've thought of it" (p. 82). See also Admussen, p. 10.

10. On his first typescript, Beckett changed "prior to the writing" to "prior to the script." Similarly, on page 69 he changed "graphy" to "script." See note 22 below.


12. Cf. Beowulf's "word-hoard." But elsewhere Beckett suggests that the sack is a womb, a lover, or the speaker's own body.


15. Ibid., pp. 66–67. Cf. the many references in *How It Is* to "silence" and also to "long pause" (p. 72) and "without pause" (p. 136).


17. Beckett had experimented with this approach to writing as early as *Watt* (1953; New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 40: "The fit is perfect. And he knows this. No. Let us be calm. He feels it."


21. Indeed, the reader himself might say "I hear none" or ask "who all."

22. The manuscript of *How It Is*, plus the first corrected typescript, the second corrected typescript, the author's corrected galley proofs and page
proofs are all housed in the Special Collections at the Ohio State University Library in Columbus, Ohio.


25. Beckett adds: "The best that can be said for it is that it is not definitive." This letter is dated 17 March 1960, and is now at the Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

26. Cf. Watt, p. 73: "This fragility of the outer meaning. . . ."