

London Beckett Seminar 3 December 2003

Fizzle One: He is Barehead Continued...

Having closed the previous seminar while still in the midst of a sentence (perhaps something that can be more comfortably done with Beckett than any other writer), we did our best to start from where we left off: still on the first page, albeit at the end, with the sentence, 'With the result he must often, namely at every turn'.

'With the result he must often ...his eyes cast down.'

After first turning our attention to the humour created by the redundancy of 'because of the rise,' rendered as such by 'and because he always holds himself bowed,' we started to think about 'humped' and 'thrust.' It was suggested that both words seemed to oscillate between two connotations, one of activeness (focusing on the potential of both words to connote the application of a certain force), the other of attitude, suggestive of weakness (where the 'humped,' for instance, is seen as a deformity, and the head 'thrust' down is mere posture and indicative of a state of mind rather than action itself. It was also noted that the position of the character was reminiscent in some ways of a foetal position - perhaps a grotesque parody of an adult foetus, as the figure lacks the typical, prenatal curvature of the entire body (he is standing). This raised, briefly, the issue of the 'never properly born', which we skirted over, in the hope of getting on with the text.

'He loses his blood his pace is so slow.'

We passed quickly over the question of how he can be moving with enough force to draw blood, when he is moving so slowly as to allow his wounds to heal before he hits the next wall, commenting that the walls could be far apart, but that - more significantly - it had not been established how he was moving: was it an intermittent or gradual movement? If the movement were gradual, and without pause, then the former question retains some of its mystery. If the former is true, however, and the movement is sporadic, only his advancement slow (the movement of the body as a 'united' entity), then the text stays within the bounds suggested by logic. It was suggested here, through comparison with the French text, that the use of definite articles and possessive pronouns had been thrown into question to such an extent, that they both now seemed somehow inappropriate in the sentences: the use of 'his' ('his blood') is, in a sense, unnecessary (for who else's blood could he lose?) and the use of 'the' ('the little wounds') also appears slightly odd in that the wounds, presumably his, are personified, or at least distanced from what we must imagine as the unified figure. We wondered whether there were any other instances of bleeding in Beckett's texts, and concluded that, apart from a few small exceptions (e.g. Hamm's bloodstained handkerchief in *Endgame*), what figures itself more prominently is injury, deformity, monstrosity: there is little visible bloodletting. So we hovered over this unusual sentence, and it was submitted that there is play between an interior/exterior divide at work: the tunnel which, a little further on has become almost corporeal (moist and wet) acts on him, and his bleeding may act on it. There is the work his body does by itself (bleeding and healing) and that which the outside

world compels him to do (which may be to walk, or climb). The slowness, of course, adds to the comedy, and we thought briefly about the idea that comedy sometimes comes from increased speed (thinking specifically about Chaplin undercranking the camera speed so that, on playback, the motion appears to be sped up). The adage 'comedy is tragedy plus time' made its way into our discussion, then, and we considered the fact that the slapstick element in Beckett is often wound down, or up, but that it maintains, in either case, a constant speed. Where the figure of Chaplin or Keaton would rely on interrupted movement/speed, here we are presented with a constant pace, which might be seen, in one sense, to lose the humour common to that genre (though what it lacks here is quite possibly gained in some other area of comedy).

'There are places to the great hurt of his chest and back.'

Again, we were brought back to notions of birth and death, the 'places where the walls almost meet' and 'the narrow sideways' which he 'squeezes through' being correlative with the birthing process, and the birth canal, which, of course, linked neatly with the previous conjecture concerning the foetal position. Along with birth, and the 'never properly born,' came death, and the 'not able to properly die.' The use of the word 'terminus' here was met with some suspicion, and it was asked whether or not this term was being literally misused here: whether 'terminus' always connoted the end - a destination - or if (like 'bus terminal', for example, it could also be reasonably used to talk about the place at which a journey starts). This led into questions regarding history, and its representations both as cyclical process, and as linear, as teleology. It was agreed that in inferring both, both are confounded. What we have instead is a zig zag, although whether this is proffered as an alternative, or whether it is simply the midpoint between the circle and the line is another question altogether, and - it was proffered - may be put down to Samuel Beckett playing with geometry. It was also added that the 'attacks' ('he attacks the narrow sideways') was, to some extent, anathema to the general portrait we were reading: it implies too much force not to jar slightly with the feeling created. Perhaps, like a wind-up toy facing a wall, he simply repeats the attempt to move forward, endlessly, until it is somehow successful, or his energy gives out. Having slightly more savvy than a wind-up toy (though barely), he 'attacks the narrow sideways' and eventually succeeds, though he has caused himself pain. How significant is the pain, though? We noted that no more was made of the pain than this, that it remained relegated to the body parts, as feeling (it is his his chest that hurts, not him), and the observation that the body is divided up into parts, much as the faculties are in psychoanalysis (although here the division does not culminate in a reunion of the whole) was remembered from the last seminar.

'Do his eyes ...never seeing a thing.'

The question asked is immediately answered, as though the narrator were anticipating the reader's question, although it may also be fair to say that the narrator is putting words into the reader's mouth at this point: that, in spite of the evidence that shows the narrator is possibly not in complete control, this is also written in somewhere, and this idea of control was one we were to come back to a little further on. Certain redundancies were remarked upon in the second sentence here. The 'such as that come of staring,' which seemingly refers to 'needless fatigue' was noted as odd - perhaps idiomatic (Irish), or maybe another example of Beckettian ellipsis - and that

the 'even' was, contrarily, wholly unnecessary, as was the 'day after day,' although it shouldn't be forgotten, of course, that repetition is a well-documented contributor to the effects of Beckett's prose. We also discussed the second 'more and more,' which appeared to confirm the sense of the previous 'more and more' (i.e. he shuts his eyes more and more often, and not 'tighter and tighter') while making apparent the alternative reading, and thus opening the sentence up. It was also remarked that if his eyes were closed, it would be literally impossible to shut them, as they would already be shut. It is impossible for the 'more and more' at work here to imply both 'more and more often', and 'for longer and longer periods', as if they are closed for a longer period of time in each consecutive instance, then the times themselves must be rarer, and if the number of times they are closed is frequent, then the lengths must be shorter, unless this is an image of infinite time, stretching out before and after. 'Needless fatigue' also suggests another kind of fatigue at work - necessary fatigue - which might connect to ideas of compulsion in Beckett's work. We also pondered the renunciation of sight, where the movement certainly seemed to be compelled by something, though the naming of that 'something' was left for another day. Also, there was the question of the narrator's opinion - a sense of (dis)approval hinted at with the use of 'his,' which clearly separates the two opinions/ motivations, and clearly serves to distinguish the two figures further.

'This is not the time to brighten things up for one.'

If this is not the time, then when will it be? And here, of course, we have another example of aporia in Beckett: 'this is not the time to do this, and, having said that, I shall now go ahead and do it.' The notion of the achievement was brought into the discussion at this point in our reading, particularly with the phrase 'up until a point.' We were reminded of the cylinder pieces, and the idea of a ray of light emanating from a point (of light). The joke at the close of this section is apparent, and needs no explanation. More could no doubt be said on its implications, but, pressed for time, we moved on in the hope of maintaining our previous record of a page per seminar.

'And all may yet grow light without his being one whit the wiser.'

Possibility is maintained in the narrative, it was remarked, with or without our protagonist. The idiomatic speech at the close of this section was commented upon, and we wondered at the task of translation Beckett set for himself, while recognising that it is hardly a concern for the artist, particularly one so precise as Beckett.

'The moon may appear ... while there is yet time.'

The sentimental picture set up here of the moon, was duly noted, as was its sitting rather uncomfortably in such a text. Beckett's English translation at this point is more concise than the French. On the one hand, it appeared as something that couldn't be taken too seriously, while, on the other, it seemed to add a certain pathos to the text: a case of the reader knowing he is walking into a trap, but unable to resist its persuasions? We abandoned our discussion of the picturesque moon, and turned, instead, to thinking about the control mechanism in the text, to a notion of light translated into energy: while he is in darkness, he proceeds at a generally regular gait,

although he knows not where, whereas when the light hits (if the light came, and if he opened his eyes, and was able to see it), it would cause him to 'quicken his step' whether in running towards or away from it. The 'terminus' was recollected, and it was pointed out that the suggestion may simply be that, if he could see, he would be able to move more quickly towards one or the other point. It also, again, implies either a lack or a bypassing of consciousness/deliberation: as if he is a plant, merely reacting to the light without choice, heliocentric (or heliophobic). Something compels or repels here, but it has so far remained invisible. The light presented us with a possible 'something' for our theory, for a source which obliges in some way. A shutting of the eyes could, in this case, be viewed (we concluded) as a form of resistance, though this point may not have been felt by any to really hold water, as we but mentioned it. The more general (and difficult) question was put as to whether or not it was Beckett's intention to undermine certain limits and structures, or whether it happens 'accidentally': is there an enjoyment, a celebration, of limitations, or can we see it in terms of frustration and entrapment instead? We also wondered if these figures of destitution so common to the Beckett text become a kind of cliché, and, if they do, what is at work in/through them. Also, the question of whether comedy creates tension between the abstract and real was posed, and the answer postponed to January's meeting.

Lenya Samanis & Tom Mansell