

London Beckett Seminar 05 November 2003

Fizzles

Laura Salisbury, Derval Tubridy, Lenya Samanis, Gareth Scrupps, Thomas Mansell, Iraj Sheni Mansouri, and Sayaka Shoji met at 30 Russell Square to discuss *Fizzle 1* ('He is barehead'):

- *New Writing and Writers* 13 (1975).
- Samuel Beckett, *Pour Finir Encore et autres foirades* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1976), 25—37.
- Samuel Beckett, *For To End Yet Again and other Fizzles* (London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd., 1976), 23—30.
- Samuel Beckett, *Fizzles* (New York: Grove Press, 1976).
- *TriQuarterly* 78 (winter 1977)
(reprinted as *In the Wake of the Wake*, edited by David Hayman and Elliott Anderson (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978)).

With what in hindsight was uncharacteristic abandon, we jumped straight to the third word (not even bothering to ask 'who is 'He''?')!

barehead

not the more usual and natural 'bareheaded'
apparently coined on analogy with 'barefoot' – but language is
never quite this logical
what does it mean, anyway? Hatless? Bald? Empty inside (the
cupboard was bare)?
certainly aligns the figure with the protagonists of the cylinder
pieces (*Ill Seen Ill Said* etc.) rather than the earlier behatted figures
(Vladimir and Estragon, Mercier and Camier...)
makes the figure sound mythical, almost like that is his name

barefoot

we've had the top, and now straight down to the bottom:
a complete description – however, we have no idea what's in
between
although we instantly learn of the clothing, the insides remain a
mystery throughout

singlet and tight trousers

similar to attire of vaudeville comedians? yet we feel uncomfortable laughing?
autobiographical?:
young Beckett's dress? (and shoes in imitation of Joyce that pinched his feet)

too short for him

as if it is a uniform assigned to the character
'vaguely prison garb', as suggested later? perhaps hospital clothes?
'for him' is excessive pedantry, unnecessary detail –
reminiscent of discussion of Estragon's shoes
extra specificity raises possibility that it's not the trousers that are at fault, but *him*

his hands have told him so

because (as we learn later) it is dark and (as we learn later still) his eyes are closed?
only means of acquiring knowledge of the world, and of himself, is through touch
'so' is doing a lot of work: conclusive and exact, and propelling the narration on
the later works (especially *Worstward Ho*) increasingly foreground such words

again and again

the first of many repeated repetitive phrases
(i.e. phrase itself is repetitive ('again' is repeated), and the phrase as a whole is repeated)

feeling each other

hands feeling hands? hands feeling feet?
is subject of 'feeling' same as subject of 'rubbing', or is there a sleight of hand (or foot)?
self-consoling action, explored elsewhere in Beckett (*Ill Seen Ill Said*)
notion of 'company' (also *Company*)
added to later examples, contributes to sense of each body part as an individual entity,
becoming almost personification

none of his memories answer [to it], so far

unusual suggestion, that lack of memory in present will be righted with time
narrator's superior knowledge of possible outcomes seems sinister
mystery of workings of memory
(in *How It Is*, memories just erupt onto the surface)
(*Krapp's Last Tape*, for intermingling of past/present/future, and interawareness of each)
why do the memories have to 'answer to' anything anyway?
Atmosphere of interrogation

of heaviness, [...] of fullness and of thickness

strange descriptions of *memory*!
especially contrasted with the flat veneer of the prose
but 'of' always has double sense: here 'remembering heaviness *etc.*'/'heavy *etc.* memories'

The great head

for some reason reminiscent of opening of *Finnegans Wake* (Howth as H.C.E.'s head)
'great' is unusual compared with more obvious 'big'; originally '*La grande tête*'
(although 'the big head' would carry unfortunate connotations of its own)
a self-consciously 'poetic' choice of word?

where he toils

why toiling? Prison/interrogation atmosphere again
toiling usually implies physical labour: here psychical
need not refer the figure's head:
we know little about his surroundings, so perhaps that's where he is!

he is forth again

formal-sounding
Lazarus, come forth! (and Joyce's joke (he came fifth))

he'll be back again

informal-sounding; is there more than one voice speaking?
is this an example of what was just stated ('all is mockery')?
again reminiscent of *Finnegans Wake*, Finnegans begin again, and
cyclical views of history
(*For To End Yet Again?*)
(N.B. although *Fizzle I* is reprinted in *In the Wake of the Wake*, this
collection is concerned in general with writers influenced by later
Joyce; Beckett might have more specific comparisons in mind,
although does not seem that this was written to commission)
the repetition of 'again' in these two phrases further implies the
futility of his endeavour

Some day he'll see himself

again, what makes the narrator so sure? Is he in control?

his whole front, from the chest down

exactly what you do see when you first see yourself (in the absence
of mirrors)

first rigid

very easy to imagine the arms rigid – but this describes *the hands*

at arm's length

might a pedant argue that the hands are *always* at arm's length?

trembling

autobiographical reading: his mother's Parkinson's disease
other tremblers in Beckett: Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*
an interaction between inner and outer which goes both ways:
external temperature, for example, can provoke the body to tremble,
but also internal fear can produce this motion
trembling is itself a very tiny and concentrated back-and-forth
movement
always interpreted as a sign of weakness –
but wouldn't occur if there weren't a remnant of resistance
we're *always* trembling a little bit: 'essential tremor' is what keeps
us upright!
therefore apparent antithesis ('rigid' / 'trembling') is dissolved

He halts, for the first time

oh, has he been moving? What position has he been in all this time?

since he knows he's under way

is 'knows' and '[i]s') an unusual choice of tense and mood? 'since he knew he was'?

when similar constructions occur later, the past tense is used:

'when he suddenly realized he was forth';

'the point at which he suddenly realized he was started'

a Gallicism/Irishism?

emphasizes the timelessness/continuousness of the action, hence purgatorial / Sisyphean?

one foot before the other

triple sense of 'before':

1) spatial: 'in front of', therefore static

2) temporal: 'prior in time'

3) spatial/temporal: repeated action producing walking motion

(compare words like 'still', 'on', *etc.*)

(remember this comes in the description of a *halt*)

(walking can be a way of internalising time)

the higher flat, the lower on its toes

again, each foot is credited with its own individuality, and its own possessive

(c.f. later 'it is *the* shoulders take the shock' (but '*ce sont alors ses épaules qui prennent*')

(c.f. 'My head hurts' / '*J'ai mal à la tête*')

a position that can't be maintained for very long!

(unless he is climbing *stairs* – but no mention of any)

and waits for a decision

from whom? from what? from his own mind?

reinforces sense of body separate from mind, separate parts of the body separated

there's no 'decision' about it: sooner or later he'll lose balance and carry on

implication of a 'right' way and a 'wrong' way: again atmosphere of oppression

Then he moves on.

long sentence describing a halt; now short sentence describing reanimation

'on': another position/compulsion word (*Worstward Ho, The Unnamable*)

Spite of the dark

more usual would be '*In spite of the dark*', or '*Despite the dark*'
O.E.D. lists this as 'aphetic form of "despite"', i.e. with an elided or dropped syllable –
but this is rarer to find at the start of a sentence (order altered from original),
and even more rare in *writing*
(although of course the *O.E.D.* has examples (the quotation from Tyndale is apposite!))
(French is standard: '*malgré la noir*' (although does '*noir*' provide its own explanation?))
so unusual that it suggests 'the dark's spite',
the dark's quality of spitefulness, that he reacts to

hands agape

we're used to *eyes* or *mouths* gaping – but *hands*?
again imbues them with excessive individual agency

the feet

wouldn't we more naturally say 'his feet', or (as with 'hands') just 'feet'?
– further defamiliarisation / mechinisation

held back

can describe both an action and an intention, as if there's a contest of wills

he does not grope his way, arms outstretched, hands agape and the feet held back just before the ground

to how much of this does the word 'not' apply?
just to 'grope his way'? also 'arms outstretched'? and the rest?

With the result &c.

suddenly we get quite a lot of information about the surroundings and his motion
also it is suddenly quite comic, slapstick

he must often, namely at every turn

wouldn't that make 'often' 'always'? again the pedantic explication reveals an absurdity
it does not become a 'turn' until *after* he has hit the wall:
so this attempt by language to describe the process struggles with temporality and causality

against the right-hand when he turns left

again, it can only be recognised as the ‘right-hand [wall]’ *after* he has turned left –
at least, that seems to be the only way it can make sense
but perhaps we are desperately trying to visualise an impossibility, misled by apparently exact descriptions (see some of Beckett’s stage directions!)

And if you are still wondering what *Fizzle* means, consider the following:

I [Mel Gussow] sent him [Samuel Beckett] a copy of that review and commented on his word usage, saying that I thought I knew what pizzle meant but was puzzled by the word fizzle. In his response, he was more forthcoming than he had been in his previous letters. He offered two definitions of fizzle:

1. The act of breaking wind quietly, i.e. an unsuccessful fart.
2. A fiasco or failure. The French ‘foirade’ has the same meanings, plus wetness in the literal.

Then, for my further edification (and amusement), he defined pizzle as ‘a bull’s penis used for flogging’. Finally, having read the book review, he commented on my use of the expression ‘uproarious pessimism to describe his philosophy:

‘Uproarious pessimism’ is extremely *bon trovato* [Italian for appropriate]. As Nell once said ‘nothing is funnier than unhappiness.’

(Mel Gussow, *Conversations with (and about) Beckett* (London: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 1996, p. 28)

(‘Pizzle [...] puzzled [...] fizzle’ – *bon trovato!*.)

Notes by Thomas Mansell and Lenya Samanis