

London Beckett Seminar, November 5, 1998

Notes by Wilma Siccama

Identified participants: SB - Steve Barfield; DC - Daniela Caselli; SC - Steve Connor; PS - Paul Sheehan

Since a number of specific themes kept recurring during the discussion, the notes below are not presented in a chronological order, but grouped by theme.

How to situate *How It Is* in Beckett's oeuvre?

Is *How It Is* the last of the 'classic', monumental Beckett in the line of *Murphy* and the Trilogy? Or is it the beginning of the 'late' work, the beginning of the end, seeing the density of the text, the urgency of the voice, the 'breaks' in the text (cf. *Texts for Nothing*).

Title

The title of Beckett's *How It Is* is the most throwaway of Beckett's titles and at the same time the most philosophically encompassing of his work (SC).

There is a discrepancy between the title, *How It Is*, and the first line, 'how it was' (DT).

Textual Structure

The intermittence of the text, the breaks (white lines) between the passages as a motive principle in Beckett's work per se (SC). Nonetheless, there is a notion of continuity, as certain fragments seem to recur; the fragments start aggregating. It is not just scraps, there is quite a story which evolves (SC & DT).

Why are there no commas, what does it mean not to use punctuation? (SB). Perhaps because it takes the rhythm out of it (PS). Or: the lack of interpunction lets the text to be more spoken (SB). The text calls for (taking a) breath, as with the line 'When the panting stops', which is like a gap in between. In this context, SC refers to the represented orality of the text: the references to the tongue, and phrases such as "murmuring in the mud" in which the words 'murmured' and 'mud' provide the speech's punctuation.

Temporality/ Spatiality (Time/Space)

Place, there seem to be a notion of two levels : the above and the under .Time: the before, the with and the after (cf. *Molloy*). But where are 'we' now, before, with or after Pim? (DT). PS suggests that *How It Is* represents a kind of afterlife, a purgatorial state, but with a certain constancy. However, for DC it is a constancy which is characterised by repetitiveness; a constancy over and over again. SB sees a local regression, but always within the inertness, entropy of time. LB makes a remark about *How It Is* being an attempt to find a moment from where to establish past, present, and

future. DT sees *How It Is* as an investigation into the origin which defies itself in its presence; an impossible questioning, and refers to the circularity of *Company* as another example of this dynamics.

Notion of spatialised time, as in the phrase 'vast tracts of time', 'tract' being a spatial metaphor. Time is a physical type of thing; it has just collapsed back into space, in the mud; time is here or there.

Seeing the use of words like 'another', 'someone', and 'an awful lot of company', plus the reference to the sack and the tin, the speaker's (?) time and space are not entirely indeterminate.

Quotation/ Who is speaking?

'how it is I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim...'. Who is speaking here? If this is a quote, why not write say: how it was I quote 'before Pim with Pim after Pim'? Or is it a repetition, a quotation of someone else saying I quote? (see the end of *How It Is*: 'end of quotation')

The phrase 'voice once without' can mean 'the voice I was once without', but also 'the voice that was once outside' (cf. 'voix d'abord dehors') and the latter signification links up with 'invocation': putting a voice into someone. First, the voice was outside, then it was in the head, and now it comes outside again via the mouth (YT refers to Derrida's notion of 's entendre parler, and the nonconvergence of hearing agent and speaking agent). 'I say them as I hear them'(first line) can mean: 'I say them as soon as I hear them', or; 'I say them as I hear them spoken'. There are major intermissions, losses. Is this because the voice, while verbally transcribing (cf: 'recorded none the less') cannot keep up? Or does it only hear scraps?

The emphasis on speech as a form of quotation, is also present in *The Unnamable* but is here a thematic sort of quote: 'Is it me or am I being spoken?'. In *How It Is* this question seems to be settled; it is no longer a question but a given. I am being spoken (SC). SC sees a link here with modern experiences of the voice, with real life analogies of the dissociated voice, as the telegraph, the telephone/switchboard, the desperate sense of keeping up in simultaneous translation. The philosophical concern with the voice (the recorded, dissociated voice) could not have taken this turn in the previous century (SC).

The Senses; Seeing/Hearing/Touching

'ill-said, ill-heard, ill-recaptured, ill-murmured', but no mention of 'ill-seen' (LB). The problem of seeing seems not apparent in *How It Is* (though there is mention of a lamp (DC, perhaps because the face is in the mud. 'brief movements of the lower face' 'speaking is not quite seeing yourself'; SC refers to Walter Ong and his distinction between hearing, which puts you in the middle of the world, and seeing, which puts you in front of the world. There is a crossover of hearing and feeling in *How It Is*, 'ill murmured in the mud': what it feels like of feeling words coming out of your mouth (topic for discussion later).