

## LONDON BECKETT SEMINAR 8 May 2000

### The Second of the 'Three Dialogues' (*Disjecta*)

'Three Dialogues', in the form of a discussion between Beckett and the art critic Georges Duthuit, was published in *transition* in December 1949. This places it temporally between the second and third books of the Trilogy, and during the gestation of *Waiting For Godot*. The second of these dialogues is, nominally at least, about the work of Andre Masson (1896-1987), the French painter whose calligraphic Surrealism subsequently influenced Abstract Expressionism.

Even by Beckett's standards it is an opaque text, although the difficulty of establishing the tone and the meaning is to some extent offset by the wry humour (although even the jokes are far from self-evident – what terminal event, for instance, causes B. to (*Exit weeping*)).

If the tone could be established, together with the reason for the tone, then some of the opaqueness might become, if not transparent, then at least a little translucent. But the tone shifts between terse elliptic sentences and hyper-refined rhetoric, the latter alluding to unidentified sources in a manner which might parody an establishment art critic, a style reminiscent of Beckett's own early criticism. Parentheses abound, with no clue as to the original author, and critics have yet to establish the sources of these references: or are they playful Borgian red herrings? At one point B. switches to Italics:

*'The stars are undoubtedly superb, as Freud remarked on reading Kant's cosmological proof of the existence of God.'* Here the quote is attributed to Freud: the trouble is that Kant did not come up with this proof; indeed the very opposite is true for it is one of the mediaeval 'proofs' which it was left to him to demolish. Is Beckett being merely careless, or, given his impatience with philosophers ('I never read philosophers and I never understand them'), wilfully disrespectful? The sentence at the back of Freud's mind at least, which might have triggered even more disapprobation from Beckett, is probably Kant's 'Two things fill the mind with ever increasing wonder and awe: the starry firmament above and the moral law within', from the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of interpreting the tone, a characteristic theme does seem to emerge and develop during this dialogue, to which the *Exit weeping* can perhaps be regarded as the climax, rather than a humorous dismissal. This theme is the insoluble difficulty, given that some form of object remains necessary, of painting the void. For if the void slips in to become the object, even by dint of a negative, it has ceased to be what was sought to be captured. The insubstantial must become substantial before it can be apprehended, and in doing so eludes the painter's net. For Beckett, the legitimacy of the void as quarry is not an issue.

But Masson, hampered by his talent, struggles on, skewered on this dichotomy. And his struggles do lead him to a partial solution, which is to not to renounce the object, but to take it as a starting point for a process of dissolution. It is left to D. to suggest that the object can be rendered transparent, and via its 'openings, circulations,

communications, unknown penetrations,' used to breakthrough the quotidian. B. is insufficiently persuaded to agree fully, but does yield that this 'certainly throws light on the dramatic predicament of the artist' and takes the idea further by referring to Leonardo's notebooks and their reference to *disfazione* (dissolution). D. then remembers Bonnard, and seems to suggest that he had a part in this succession. Bonnard, as a Marxist reacting against the feudal possession of land, and by extension landscapes, had begun what might loosely be called a merging process. After this D. attempts a conciliatory sentence, which is more than B. can stomach. Or is it? Might it not be that his weeping is also a form of dissolution, a way of reducing the solid. And might there be, hovering discretely behind the previous rhetoric, (and given, of course, our subsequent knowledge of Beckett's quest) the joke that the critic's over-refined language threatens to reduce his capacity to create a meaningful sentence: thus he, inadvertently, moves towards achieving what his quarry, the artist, failed to?

Richard Hendin

Stéphanie Ravez adds:

I finally managed to trace our elusive "quotation inside a quotation inside a quotation" or Kant inside Freud inside Beckett (to those who missed our last two sessions, I'm alluding here to the *Three Dialogues*). Therefore Richard, Cease to search! The allusion is to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (and not to the "Cripure" as a facetious Sartre or was it Nizan? would call it) and more specifically to the very end of the book, its conclusion: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence.etc" I would like to quote more, especially as it seems to me that the following sentences might bear an indirect connection with the cosmological proof, which is discussed at length in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and which, apparently, Beckett misquotes by associating it with the moral law. A suivre...