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The Lost Ones (continued)

Section Eight: "It is curious to note . . . "

Amidst the parched language of *The Lost Ones*, section eight appears to be rather bookish, with a studied elegance that gestures toward the baroque. Unexpected internal rhymes (sages and ages) and syntactical oddities such as the Latinate "Cleave also" obtrude from the level language which figured previous descriptions of the cylinder. This section could almost be read as a parody of an eighteenth century report on the exotic, as these sedentary searchers are described as being, for instance, "morbidly susceptible to the least want of consideration". These "semi-sages" echo the appearance of other "sages" in the Beckett corpus; in particular "that extreme eastern sage who having clenched his fists from the tenderest age" in *How It Is* p.59 (London: John Calder, 1964), and the moment in *Proust* (p.18) where Memory and Habit are described as "the flying buttresses of the temple raised to commemorate the wisdom of the architect that is also the wisdom of all sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, the wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire" (London: John Calder, 1965). Here, though, the "sages" are reduced to "semi-sages", which is rather more diminishing than even a straight translation of the French "demi-sages". The level French of "ceux qui s'agitent encore" is, however, inflated to "those still fitfully fevering" with its Shakespearean echo (*Macbeth* Act 3, Scene 2); although the question remains as to precisely how operative these echoes are.

The sedentary which appear here, of whom there are about twenty, are not the vanquished or even permanently sedentary. They represent points of stasis within this rotating belt, and although the French "piste" describes a track or even a circus ring, the English translation of "belt" implies the more inhuman motion of astronomical or even astrological phases. The notion that the sedentary are "Dead to the ladders to all intents and purposes" becomes bleakly ironic in this belt where there is only one intent, and the possibility of other desires, movements or possibilities, flowers only to be remorselessly and repeatedly shut down. There is, however, a certain aesthetic delight in this (in)human pageant of "old age to infancy" as the sedentary are described as those to be "admired" rather than simply "repr³/₄ sentes". Strangely, the possibility that there could be infant semi-sages is introduced. The description of the violence which occurs as the sedentary are stepped upon and emit outbursts of fury seems incongruous to the function of both the cylinder and the deadpan tone of the narration. Again, the question remains as to whether such moments are permissible or whether they are an aberration within this system, as there have been earlier instances of controlled violence, such as when the climbers turn on others. These moments of "ferment" could be another example of the fluctuant movement of the cylinder as it is thrown from equanimity into agitation. Beckett tried out the phrase "set the entire cylinder by the ears" as a translation for "mettre tout le cylindre en ³/₄ moi", although "ferment" is traced through with an seemingly appropriate echo of "firmament".

Section Nine: "To be noted finally . . . "

The searchers who are weary of searching "skirt with measured tread" the imaginary edge of the climbers' territory. This strangely stately description represents a return to the measured tone of both cylinder and narration. These weary searchers move "counter-carrier-wise" (carrier-wise is clockwise) although these two narrow rotating rings are only visible "at times". It is unclear whether this is because the movement or the illumination from above is inconstant. Although Beckett first tried out "swarming enclave" as a translation for the appropriately corporeal "pullelment central", he settled on "teeming precinct" which maintains the sense of an unstoppable force of desire but connects it somewhat incongruously with a regulated (aesthetically or otherwise) social space. The searchers' eyes are described as "devouring" in a characteristically Beckettian moment where one sense spills out into another (see *Fizzles* and *Rockaby*). Sight is described as peculiarly physical - reminiscent of a Leibnizian or Bergsonian sense of vision construed in terms of vibration. Vision certainly seems to be being drawn away from its common representation as a separative sense into what could be read as a pre-modern awareness of the physicality of sight. There are also, of course, psychoanalytic links between looking and devouring.

Section Ten: "One body per square metre . . . "

Section ten offers a poker-faced "Picturesque detail" of "a woman with white hair still young to judge by her thighs leaning against the wall with eyes closed in abandonment and mechanically clasping to her breast a mite who strains away in an effort to turn its head and look behind." Allegorical possibilities flower once again in this parody of a Renaissance Madonna and Child, or the strangely precocious Christs in medieval painting; but they are swiftly passed over. The image of "Sucklings who have no longer to suck" offers a typical moment of linguistic self-cancellation, but it can also be read as a peculiar conflation of compulsion and indifference, desire and satiety. The syntactical oddity of "huddle at gaze" similarly collocates action and passivity. The "precocious postures" of these "tiny ones" as they advance into collapse and sprawl in an premature echo of the vanquished or even the dead (although we see no dead here), represent a coincidence of the extremes of old age and of infancy – a coincidence of contraries (see *Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce*).

There is an abrupt shift from the mite to a description of the vanquished: "None looks within himself where none can be". There is an incontrovertible absoluteness about this statement, although the conditional tone of "can" introduces a contingency into this seemingly solid moment of negation, as "none" both can and cannot be inside the self. Later on in this section, the vanquished, who make their way to the tunnels, are described as "in search of nothing", and so nothing again becomes simultaneously both an absence of searching and its object. It might be significant to note that to lose one (a lost one) is to be left with zero (a none). This movement of repeated self-cancellation, of positing and subtracting, perhaps demands a consideration of whether the whole system in the cylinder is reversible. Again, the question is raised as to who is looking for what and why. In this cylinder of two hundred bodies, this space which is certainly not as large as an Inferno, why is the search so fruitless? There is, of course, the possibility that this is simply a scale model of a much larger system.

The vanquished who stray through the throng are described as "indistinguishable to the eye of flesh from the still unrelenting". The "still unrelenting" might refer to both/either the sedentary and/or the searchers. The possibility of an external observer is again posited, but this time with a surprising degree of corporeality. It is suggested that the searchers and the sedentary do not have an "eye of flesh", for they are able to recognise the vanquished, and thus it is perhaps the observer's eye which is fleshly. An inversion takes place of the more expected model of painfully material inhabitants of the cylinder being observed by an abstracted eye, perhaps even an Eye of the Mind. This distinction will later be blurred as the vanquished can, we are told, be distinguished by a "profoundly bowed" posture which is surely perceptible to both the eye of flesh and its other (the disembodied eye? the eye of the mind? the devoured eye?). However, abandonment often freezes these vanquished ones in a tense and compulsive stasis that will recur in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. As the entire motion of the cylinder is traced through with the movement of oscillation and quivering, it might be possible that these vanquished ones, frozen in space, are either points of stillness around which the others move, or that they are similarly trembling but in a way that is sped up or slowed down to such an extent that it appears as stasis. It was suggested that there might be a connection between this trembling and rigor and Beckett's mother's Parkinsonism.

This palpitating movement of motion and stasis alongside the fluctuation of light and temperature described earlier in the text would seem to be mirrored in the actions of the cylinder's inhabitants. The spent eyes of the vanquished can suddenly revive and desire to devour once more. This movement is described through the simile of the heap of sand which is prefaced by what appears to be almost an epic formula: "Even so . . .". From this point, the narration begins to billow out with a surprising degree of enthusiasm. The heap of sand, "lessened by three grains every second year and increased by two every following", figures the fluctuant movement of those in the cylinder in their oscillation between revival and abandonment; although the movement maintains its general thrust towards decline and depopulation (*Le D^{3/4} peupleur*). Indeed, in this constant reduction of one grain, "one" is always being "lost". There are four groups in the cylinder that represent degrees of coming to rest: those perpetually in motion, those who sometimes pause, the sedentary and the vanquished (both moving and static) which are numbered 120, 60, 20, and 5 respectively at this present moment ("and there will be no other"). This vanquishment which earlier appeared so final is thrown into question by the assertion that they "still have some way to go". There is no progressive decline through the ranks from searcher to vanquished, for the "ill-vanquished may at long intervals and with each relapse more briefly revert to the state of the sedentary", whilst these are also known to return to the ladders. However, the general direction of movement in the cylinder remains inexorably that of motion towards stasis. Logically, once rested, the searchers can never return to their ceaseless searching. This movement tends towards zero but does not attain the plenitude of nothing, where void and plenum could be figured as equivalent; for "when in the cylinder what little is possible is not so it is merely no longer so and in the least less the all of nothing."

There are some portentous rhetorical moments in this section which become almost enthusiastically biblical in their description of categories in the cylinder: "In the beginning . . ." But it was noted that in this text there are no singulative events; instead all events recur (apart from the last) and are described in the frequentative

tense. It is strange that in this abstract recurring system we still get the sense that events are taking place - glimpsed even as they fade out of view. It is impossible at this point to decide whether we are viewing the cylinder near its beginning or its end. This is only made clear at the very end of the text, and even then it is not possible to make any retrospective judgement on the present state because we have no way of knowing how fast the progression towards decline has been accelerated. But it is suggested that if the vanquished can revive, there is a possibility that no movement in the cylinder is irreversible. Whether the direction of time is constant or not, the notion of an eternal recurrence seems possible, although beyond any real conception, in this world of cold distance and astronomical time – this "vast space of time impossible to measure".

Seemingly, there are social bonds that obtain within the cylinder between man and wife, between relatives and, with characteristically blank humour, between those who are "mere acquaintances"; although how one could tell the difference between a relative and an acquaintance in these conditions is not revealed. Marriage surely cannot take place or even be imagined within the cylinder; so does the existence of wedded couples imply that there was a life before this one where such bonds were possible? Can this space be compared to a Dantean Inferno or Purgatory where relationships are carried over into an after-life? There is, of course, a possibility that these are not actual husbands and wives but that "man and wife" simply names a bond which is formed due to the cylinder's own logic – a logic undetectable by an observing eye or "an intelligence". Indeed, "If they recognise each other it does not appear", and so the possibility of an interaction between the inhabitants which is comprehensible through anything other than the cylinder's ungraspable laws of aesthetic regulation, is closed down: "Whatever it is they are searching for it is not that".

Laura Salisbury