

## London Beckett Seminar February 11 1999

### 'Darkward Bound' The Lost Ones I

The title misleads: the 'lost ones' are not the vanquished, but those who need to be found. It is perhaps the most variant title in the Beckett corpus, but in keeping with the French original (*Le Dépeupleur*) everything is dépeuplé, depopulated, emptied out. Also variant is the height of the 'flattened cylinder' – given in the first French edition as 18 metres. This does not yield the desired mathematical solution, the 'total surface' of 12 million cm<sup>2</sup>, and is amended in the English edition to 16 metres – which does (more or less) yield the required amount.

A series of philosophical and scientific allegories seem to arise. And there is playing on the discourse of science – on Maxwell's demon, for example. The world of the text is constructed from scratch, from the specifications meticulously given; all that exists of this world is what gets described. It seems that the only way to read such a world is allegorically, in order to shield the text from the utter arbitrariness of its *sui generis* invention. Yet by scrupulously excluding any overt reference to the 'human condition', Beckett leaves us with the urge to make allegorical what lacks, finally, sufficient material to carry it out. And as a 'world' it is entropically reduced – there is no 'life' as such, just a collocation of entirely separate elements.

The text also registers a disparity between levels. The faintly self-regarding nature of the language is mixed in with sentences which are terrifyingly stark ('Then all go dead still'). Epic similes seem to be in preparation, and could almost be described as Virgilian. And some sentences evoke nineteenth-century sermons: 'the end of our abode on earth' – particular pressure is exerted on 'abode' (a space where bodies 'abide').

Everything is notional in this world, especially narrative; there is, in fact, no temporal progression at all. Yet tenses are nonetheless played with: futurity is glimpsed, and then squashed. Spatially, the more the chamber is imagined as a place, the more enigmatic it becomes. It is related to the height of persons and the availability of instruments. If there is a quincunx every 10 metres, then  $10 \times 50 = 500$ . But they are cunningly disposed, making it impossible ever to have a complete map of the system.

Amidst the mathematical specificity are evocations of messy corporeality – a corporeality that is, however, withdrawn almost as soon as it is given. 'Those with stomach still to copulate strive in vain': it is nothing *human* that is being sought, nothing that might resemble 'love'. And light seems to be equated with breathing. A sound goes with the light, affecting the skin – which has become a generalised skin, and contributes to the formation of a total biological system. Just as only what exists in this world is what gets described, only what is actually written is seen/experienced.

The ladders are reminiscent of other ladders in Beckett's work. The ladder-joke from Watt seemed relevant ('Do not climb up the ladder Ifor, I have taken it away'), given the discussion of stranded climbers later in the text. Jacob's ladder? There are

reminders of Wittgenstein and the ladder of language, employed to climb to a point above language, at which point the ladder can be kicked away. Presumably 'single'ladders mean not folding, or stepladders (so unlike Clov's ladder in *Endgame*).

The deficient rungs: 'But the want of three in a row calls for acrobatics'. (Beckett's first draft of the English translation tries out a nice joke - 'the want of three running' - but subsequently relinquishes it. 'Acrobatics' derives from Gk. *akros*, the top or topmost). There seems to be an odd non-sequitur between the two sentences: 'These ladders are nevertheless in great demand and in no danger of being reduced to mere uprights runged at their extremities alone. For the need to climb is too widespread.' The insatiability of the desire to climb ought to mean the accelerated decay of the ladders rather than their preservation in a climbable condition. The higher logic - the logic of the narrative rather than the realistic logic of events - would seem to be that, given the narrative principle of the desire to climb, there must be ladders to climb with.

Paul Sheehan/Steve Connor