

London Beckett Seminar May 13 1999

The Lost Ones (continued)

Section four

Section four seems to be one of the most complete paragraphs of the text, almost a 'little island of reflection' about what is not in the cylinder, the elsewhere.

Usually this text discusses codes of practice, while this section deals with "beliefs", which, supposedly, should imply communication among the inhabitants of the cylinder. However, no information on if, how and when the "little people" talk is provided. The two opinions are said to "divide without opposing"; two different verbs are used, to "swear" and "to dream". The expression "one school swears" brings back to medieval contentions, although all the elements of schismatism are missing in this context, since the two groups keep 'converting' from one position to the other. "Conversion" is a property of the cylinder, similar to the fluctuation of light and heat; it is part of the cylinder's natural ecology. It can also be an economy of the cylinder, characterised by its proceeding by "insensible degrees".

The "gradual", "fluctuant", almost imperceptible progression of death is related to the "desultory and slow" decline of one of the two "persuasions" in favour of the other. Both the reference to the "visitor" and to the "one" who "must be in the secret of the gods" in order to perceive, create the idea of a superior perceiver, separate from the speaker/narrator. The incongruity of the phrase "secrets of the gods" is similar to that of "nature's sanctuaries" ("asiles de la nature"); Sebastian Neumeister has argued that the latter is a reference to Lamartine's poem 'Le vallon' (1819): 'Prêtez-moi seulement, vallons de mon enfance, / Un asile d'un jour pour attendre la mort.' (Strophe I) 'Repose-toi, mon âme, en ce dernier asile, (...)' (Strophe X). (Sebastian Neumeister, "Das Allegorische Erbe. Zur Wiederkehr Dantes bei Becketts *Le Dépeupleur*, 1970", *Materialien zu Samuel Becketts 'Der Verwaiser'*, Manuel Lichtwitz (ed.), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990, pp. 107-128, p. 126.)

Among others, these 'unlikely' expressions contribute to the sardonic tone used in narrating of the way out.

There may be more than two groups or "schools"; a third group, made of those who are no longer "loyal to that old belief" (in the way out), may be added to the two groups believing in a secret passage and in a trapdoor, respectively. Maxwell's demon, the sorting device which preserves the system from decay without implying any expenditure of energy (see notes of 4 March, 1999), can also be read as a third presence, similar to the provisional external agency postulated in *How It Is*, which replenishes the sacks. The term "provision", already encountered in *How It Is*, can be found in section six too, again related to ideas of providence and external agency. The system/text cannot be completely closed, otherwise we could not read it, we could not 'be the visitor'; the possibility of absolute narration can be read as opposed to the possibility of entropy.

Section five

This section has a role similar to that of the centre in *Quad*, which is theoretically suggested but not there. The idea of this paragraph as a 'black spot' is reinforced by one of the manuscript versions in French, in which the paragraph ends with the words "il ne merite pas un paragraph à part".

The philosophical "ideal preying on one and all" suggests a more abstract search, so that a reading of "one" as unity might be attempted, although the French text points to a person ("Ce n'est pas tant par manque de coeur ou d'intelligence qu'à cause de l'idéal dont chacun est la proie.")

The "explosions of violence" are counted as examples of fraternity; this polemical "ideal" of fraternity allows to declare hitting each other as better than having nothing to do with each other. The passage referring to the "instant of fraternity" is a self-gathering of enthusiasm in the narration, which then suddenly "goes dead still", thus reproducing the cylinder's laws of oscillation and fluctuation. The humour obeys to these laws too. This text can be read as a 'inter-convertible machine', reproducing at the textual level the conventions it states as "natural" to the world of the cylinder ("Nothing more natural" the text claims, with a 'shrug', in section seven.)

Butterflies, like dry leaves, are inscribed in the text while declared external, "foreign".

Section 6

This section illustrates one of the given of the text, namely that there is a "rule against mounting the ladder more than one at a time", which for exactitude resembles a law. The difference between concepts of "convention", "rule", "law" was discussed, and it was pointed out how conventions allow a larger margin for non-observance and change than laws. Moreover, a law presupposes the problem of a lawmaker, of some external authority. The relationship established in the text between the absence of a rule and its non-observance is problematic insofar as the non-observance of a rule would invalidate the existence of the rule as such.

The text proceeds as a structuralist anthropological analysis of the code; references to "taboo" (a word only present in the English text) and modes of descriptions are reminiscent of the references to anthropology in *Watt* and *Molloy*. The phrase "idle to imagine" reintroduces through the backdoor notions of 'unnecessary' and 'redundant', which the text tries to expunge by devising rules. Idleness can be taken as the threatening entropy of the closed system in which no demon is posited. However, the system of the cylinder also struggles to keep demons out, fearing to be transformed into a "pandemonium". The narrative thus pursues an ideal of perfect co-ordination of parts, seemingly without an agency. This would allow an end in which all would have been for the best. And yet, the narrative cannot turn itself into the same kind of machine it is narrating about; redundancy and flaws are still present (reference was made to the adoption of the metaphor of Medieval tapestry, whose mark of perfection was precisely a flaw, to describe Joyce's work.)

Ladders in Beckett appear with such frequency (not only in *The Lost Ones*, but also

in *Watt* and *Endgame*) as to be de-familiarised. The ladder as prop allows for both discipline and acrobatics. Each ladder is in *The Lost Ones* a singular entity, since they all have different rungs missing. Ladders also point to Dante's *Purgatorio*, which is structured as a series of ascending stairs and ladders and, possibly, to Bosch's representations of hell. Ladders can be read as evoking the game 'snakes and ladders', too. Furthermore, the ladder can be related to 'scale', musical scale, 'tempo', and the little people's "inner timepiece", which in the French text is "sablier intérieur", an expression which may suggest a link between 'intuition' and dryness, sandiness.

The 'scale' is also part of the imperceptible degrees by which the narrative proceeds, as in a silent comedy film slowed down almost intolerably. The section where the pace is increased is the last 'unabandoned' paragraph, added in 1970. The narrative wants to establish absolute equivalence among every possible element; it does not seem to tolerate what goes 'unperceptibly' in the other sense; and yet there is always a rest which cannot be squeezed into the determinable, the stable, the regulated.

The verb "to plump" was, in the first version of the translation, rendered with the verb "to put one's money on".

Section seven

The text is an allegory of allegorising. The narrative produces "irresistible" allegorical readings, while simultaneously going in the direction opposite from the additional principle of allegory by "exposing" everything. The narrative makes the little worlds stand for something else, and each paragraph can be read as a fresh allegory.

The paragraph's first sentence uses the terms "transport" and "pleasure" which can be read against *Endgame*'s "transport of joy".

This section has an astronomical quality; the ladders are moved "eddywise", a direction still uncertain at this stage of the text (later, in section 12, the queuing searchers will be said to move towards the right while a "counter carrierwise" movement creates a "second even narrower belt"). The text constructs worlds, drawing attention to their structure, while simultaneously foregrounding the minimal changes in the language, thus creating a double perspective, which can be dizzying.

A brief discussion on the age factor in the cylinder closed the session. Growing up and getting old does not necessarily have to be posited in order to accept the last paragraph's "unthinkable end". Rather, one may think of decay, rather than growth, or to a system like that of *How It Is*, in which generations take the place of their predecessors.

Notes by Daniela Caselli