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'The Humanities I Had' How It Is - Part 1

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The text proceeds through image sequences rather than plot unfolding: the pot; the crocus; the woman who runs away to her friends. The images are temporally unfixed. Are they being recalled, or are they actually happening? The question arises as to where they belong. They seem to anticipate *Company* (as John Pilling has noted).

There are references to the 'callers who come'. Moments of unabashed display of the private take place amidst moves of undoing which take them away from particularity - for example, memories of 'first asparagus'. The result is that the text jerks into an odd sort of focus. At the same time, voice behaves like some kind of background noise which eventually becomes audible. It is a heard voice

The image of praying is a kind of apparition in present time, not recalled from the narrator's previous life, or as having been had. It is a photograph - literally a kind of snatched image. This raises the question of the ability of photographs to suck up all the available memory. There is the sense of a very ordinary, vernacular experience that's being drawn on here, that is both haunted and haunting. Relations of looking are important; visuality has been slow to come, and is secondary to touch.

The images are eidetic - substitutes for perception, some of which become as strong and commanding as perceived images (others are more perfunctory). It is almost as if Beckett has taken seriously the notion of the necessity of distance.

The images might be seen as Beckett's participation in literary modernism's relationship with the cinema ('a lamp being blown out'). Seeing is sharply differentiated from the other senses. Everything is nebulous - mud, mouth, words - then suddenly these images are pulled free of them. Memories hover, then are extinguished. Perhaps it is a memory of the Unnamable - a reincarnation memory, rather than a memory of this life.

'The humanities I had': a refrain indicating the bankrupt remains of the various branches of the humanities. It allows for plenty of Beckettian scraps of ill-adjusted knowledge. From scraps of knowledge to scraps of embodiment: Beckett gives us the whole body, but in bits, composed of tiny fragments. This is redolent of Watt's walk, with its references to various of the body's parts.

Sack and mud are closely related. Is the sack a kind of 'mud substitute'? While it is indistinct, the mud is purgatorial. (Proust's epigraph comes to mind: 'The world is mud.') Mud is metabolic - transformative and yielding. It goes through the narrator as words go through him. Everything is churned together in the mud; and yet, there are things which stand out against it. The narrator evinces a curiously unrevolted attitude to mud. It is not base matter, the other, a heterologous medium of excess. The narrator

is joined to the mud, there is no real sense of distinction. Related to this, the sack functions as a kind of image of the body. Mud thus signifies an interchange between inner and outer. There is some turbulence in the system (i.e. the mud) which is the speaker's report. This report - unlike the hysterical, panic-stricken locutions of the Unnamable - is more patiently enquiring as to its present conditions/form of life.

There are echoes of Wilfred Bion's theory of the 'attack on linking'. When schizophrenic patients are psychoanalysed, at a certain stage of the treatment, when all is otherwise going well, the patient will become terrified that the safe dissociation of the world is breaking down. This will precipitate attacks on things that form linkages - things such as language, or bodily forms. In *How It Is* there are 2 bodies: the individual body of the speaker, and the body of the work. Story is drawn in at one end and expelled/excreted out the other. The speaker, that is to say, might be a worm-like creature, a creature most like the medium it inhabits. Worm and speaker are both scarcely distinguishable from the mud in which they're mired.

The voice is the sustained evocation of gurgles down the plughole - an evocation of the barest, sparest, most minimal kind of life there can be. This is the role of elemental substances in Beckett's world.