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Fizzle 2 ['Horn came always'], in Samuel Beckett. *The Complete Short Prose, 1929—1989*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995: pp. 229—31.

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Our approach on this occasion was neither chronological nor thematic. Rather like the light in the text that is on only intermittently, we caught various glimpses of the text in hand. Unfortunately I do not see the lingering image 'more and more clearly the more it enter[s] shadow' – so before it completely fades from view, 'I must now try once more to elucidate, that it may be a lesson to me'.

After *Fizzle 1*, we were struck by the initial assertion, the matter-of-fact, perfunctory confidence of 'Horn came always at night'. The use of a first-person narrator marks a significant difference from *Fizzle 1*. Whereas the narrator of *Fizzle 1* seemed to take a semi-sadistic pleasure in the protagonist's plight, here the narrator portrays himself as suffering a situation in which he in fact suffers little. 'I' seems to be controlling the encounter, yet he speaks of having to 'bear' what it involves. There may be a connection to be made with Freud's suggestion in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' that masochism is sadism that has turned in on itself. Laura Salisbury recalled Stéphanie Ravez's article on sadomasochism (see 'From Cythera to Philautia, an Excursion into Beckettian Love', *Other Becketts*, eds. Daniela Caselli, Steven Connor, Laura Salisbury), that reads the construction of a tortured space in *Malone Dies* through the rhetorical trope of autontimorumenos (literally, 'I torment myself'). The rhetorical moment that Freud describes in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', when 'the desire to torture has turned into self-torture and self-punishment [...] The active voice has changed, not into the passive, but into the reflexive, middle voice', perhaps also has significance here. Freud goes on to connect the reversible sadism/masochism structure with the scopophilia/exhibitionism dyad. The reversible binary of observation and display also seems to be relevant to this text, as we shall see with 'the face' later.

Characters in Beckett's later work are rarely named, which makes 'Horn' something of an exception. We wondered at the various associations of this unusual name, some of which involve sound and music (a brass instrument, the horn of a gramophone), and others relating to animal horns. The sexual implications of 'horn' – the horns of a cuckold, having the horn – were irresistible. Such associations encouraged a reading which emphasised the narrator's and Horn's peculiar brand of nocturnal intimacy, via a privileging of such phrase-fragments as 'Horn came always at night. [...] I masked it as best I could, but when I got out of bed it was sure to show. [...] Hence Horn at night. [...] I desired him [...]'].

As with *Fizzle 1*, we found ourselves trying to concoct practical explanations for the almost abstract pattern confronting us: why does the speaker not speak while the light is on? Assuming that we are indeed supposed to assume that Horn speaks the words he has just read, could he perhaps be altering the text? If his rendition is entirely

faithful, perhaps speaking them in the dark attests to the importance of first memorising and internalising those words. Similar processes of hopeless deduction attempted to discover what the text itself might be. Is it a story? Is the story of someone's life, a true story? Perhaps it is the story of the reader, or the listener himself? Is the story perhaps the one we are now reading? Perhaps Horn is a detective, like Moran in *Molloy*; again under the influence of Horn's name, we wondered whether he could be investigating a possible adultery.

We were also reminded of Beckett's role in assisting Joyce in the composition of *Finnegans Wake*: Joyce's eyesight fading, he would dictate passages for Beckett (and others) to record in writing; the scribe would then read the words back to Joyce. In particular, the passage 'I'll call out, if there is a knock, Come in!' seemed to recall the apocryphal occasion on which Beckett dutifully wrote 'Come in', when Joyce was in fact answering the door; when Joyce discovered the inadvertent presence in the text, he decided to keep it. Another form of our search for certainty involved recalling parallels in other works by Beckett – but here the possibilities were multiple. The fundamental scenario of a discourse involving a light that goes on and off was reminiscent of *Rough for Theatre II* (late 1950s, pub. 1976). The arrangement of 'light silence, dark speech' is the reverse of that of *Play* (1964) but looks forward to the start of *Company* (1979): 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.' There is a sense, by this stage in his career, in which Beckett is writing the kind of things that Beckett would write. Beckett was increasingly aware of this, though; ultimately he stopped short of including the line 'like something out of Beckett' in the late play *That Time*.

'Light silence, dark speech' also implies that silence is a relief, and that the speech is both obscure and foreboding. One element of the narrator's speech which we found obscure concerned the face. At first the narrator seems to be referring to his own face: 'It was five or six years since anyone had seen me, to begin with myself. I mean the face I had pored over so, all down the years. Now I would resume that inspection, that it may be a lesson to me, in my mirrors and looking-glasses so long put away. I'll let myself be seen before I'm done.' However, the face that then draws our attention, and the narrator's, is that of Horn. 'Interrupting him one night I asked him to light his face. [...] I desired him at the outset to light his face and keep it lit till further notice.' So to which face does the narrator refer when he says, 'I still see, sometimes, that waning face disclosing, more and more clearly the more it entered shadow, the one I remembered.' (This strange phenomenon recalled that of the echo in *Fizzle I* which is louder than its source.) The more obvious candidate for the 'waning face' is Horn, while 'the one [the narrator] remembered' is more likely his own. The narrator concludes, 'In the end I said to myself, as unaccountably it lingered on, No doubt about it, it is he.'

Again guided by our experience of other Beckett texts, we are prone to suspect that the narrator is unwilling or unable to recognise the identity of his face and Horn's. Even the possibility that the narrator and Horn are one and the same was somehow taken as supporting the sexual/sensual-encounter interpretation – although how Horn can be simultaneously both the actual object of the narrator's affections and a fabricated projection of the narrator's own anxieties about his lustful thoughts was perhaps a paradox too far. Readers of Beckett are familiar with the possibility that even differently-named and distinctly-identified characters can be manifestations of

the same person. There is a strong lineage of narrators who show little concern with maintaining distinctions and with those (sometimes the same) who self-confessedly dramatise their own words and thoughts. One thinks especially of the vehement denial and assertion of the third-person in *Not I* (1973); and the main precedent for identifying two apparently distinct figures as being one and the same person is, of course, *Film* (1967). Another precedent is Murphy, who hates the part of himself that desires *Celia*.

The narrator had earlier claimed he ‘had more trouble with the body proper’, but within the space of a few phrases he stated ‘the body was of less consequence. Whereas the face, no, not at any price.’ This interjected ‘no’ recalls the final section of *Fizzle I*, which in the English version reads ‘Or again, second example, no, not a good example.’: a particularly abrupt change of mind. Here it is unclear whether the ‘no’ is an interruption that prevents the danger of words about the face, or whether ‘no, not at any price’ is in fact the message about the face which the narrator wants to convey. In unraveling the differing significance of ‘face’ and ‘body’, we considered that the face is the locus of identity and memory. It is also the part of the body that is always naked and exposed to the world. This makes the narrator’s phrase ‘I masked it [the body proper] as best I could’ especially awkward, since a mask is a covering or disguise designed specifically for the face.

As in *Fizzle I*, our narrator regales us with details that seem both precise and arbitrary at the same time: the most prominent example here is ‘five or six minutes’ (which is repeated in ‘five or six years’). Later in the piece, the former is referred to, quite conventionally, as ‘the five or six minutes’. It has gained a definite article, and indeed ‘five or six’ has become more definite, a set quantity which must be referred to in just that form, but which is in itself inexact. A similar potentially-deceptive certainty attaches to Horn’s response in the exchange ‘And her gown that day? [...] The yellow’. The form of his answer can be meaningful only if her wardrobe consisted of the exact same design of gown in several different colours, or if ‘the yellow [gown]’ already has such particular significance for the narrator that this shorthand identification will be sufficient to identify the dress in question. (This would also necessitate Horn’s awareness of this significance.) But in this very discussion we can see the process of over-legitimising written phrases in action: for the answer ‘the yellow’ was only ‘for example’, and even the question ‘And her gown that day?’ was ‘for example’. Neither question nor answer need actually have taken place; and all these details are distractions from the real mystery for all without access to the narrator’s store of memories, namely, what is ‘that day’, who is ‘she’, and why the narrator’s need to ask?

Also reminiscent of *Fizzle I* was the narrator’s sensitivity to different shades of passing time, and the inability of language to be unambiguous on these matters. For example, the action ‘Now I would resume’ hovers in an indeterminate zone between past, present, and future; the status of the conditional makes it impossible even to determine whether the resumption ever took place. As with *Fizzle I*, elements of the narration are simultaneously presented and removed: the mention of ‘mirrors’ and ‘looking-glasses’ is to inform us that they were ‘so long put away’ – but were they ever brought back out? Here, even the very information about the removal of the objects is possibly removed. Such is the doubt into which the narrator’s punctiliousness throws himself and us that he suggests that time itself is a fabrication

of narrative: 'These allusions to now, to before and after, and all such yet to come, that we may feel ourselves in time.' This comment threatens to exceed its application to the narrator's story-within-a-story, revealing our reliance on such structures whether we are telling a story or not.

Having already destabilised our assumptions about identity and time, the narrator also exposes place as a structural device. 'I thought I had made my last journey [...] the one from which it were better I had never returned.' The absence of any particulars about where the journey takes him or the reasons for making it implies the irrelevance of such details; the only places that seem to exist in this world are here and elsewhere, A and B. This lends a somewhat ironic twist to the reflection '[b]ut the feeling gains on me that I must undertake another', as the overwhelming sense is that all journeys are the same. The inextricable nature of time, motion, identity is conveyed in the image of the narrator's feeling gaining on him: the decision to make a journey seems not to be his, and the only progress the narrator seems likely to make on this journey is backwards.

As time 'ran out', we wondered about the 'bars of the bed' and its suggestion of an institutional setting (not as strong as *Fizzle 1*'s 'vaguely prison garb' though). We also returned to 'yellow' – the colour, for example, of 'her' gown, as well as of the glimmer of the light – recalling that it is the name of one of the stories in *More Pricks Than Kicks*. We also tried to remember other Beckettian settings illuminated by yellow – rather than bone-white or grey – light, speculating that one of the cylinder pieces was characterized by a sulphurous hue. The narrator's aside 'as we shall see' as the text entered its final phase paralleled a similarly ominous promise near the end of *Fizzle 1* ('these bones of which more very shortly') which we were not quite sure had been broken. The 'last' few sentences produced much laughter; but amusing as they are, it is hard to assimilate their tone and content with the prior context of *Fizzle 2*. This joke about 'athletics' seems instead to demand to be read in a more intertextual context. To mention the name Descartes in response to the phrase 'I wore out the machine before its time' is to feel like something of an automaton oneself; but if we removed our Beckettian eyeglasses, would images of Berkeley fade?

The way *Fizzle 2* raised the spectres of so many other texts by Beckett led us once again to consider the status of the *Fizzles*. We tend to take Beckett's self-deprecating titles as ironic considering his now universally-acknowledged mastery; but perhaps we ought to take Beckett's suggestion at face value for a moment. The act of gathering up such pieces into a collection endows them with a certain canonical status; but it also inclines us to judge the *Fizzles* as different attempts to approach the same theme. This tendency inevitably means – once one has decided what that common theme could be – that certain of the *Fizzles* are more successful than the others (although Beckett's complex negative economies of success and failure rather hamper the establishment of stable criteria that would enable such value judgements to be made). In this case, the quality of Beckett's writing varies within the same piece, and one of only seven hundred words at that. While *Fizzle 2* is eminently Beckettian, reading it feels (as perhaps writing it felt) very much like going through the motions – and perhaps, informed by the text, not even that.

Notes by Thomas Mansell