

LONDON BECKETT SEMINAR: JANUARY 26 2000

Embers

We started our first session devoted to *Embers* by listening to the original BBC radio production of the play (24th June 1959), with Jack McGowran playing the part of Henry.

Jack McGowran sounded too theatrical at times, although his broken voice fits some gloomier passages well. The blank humble voice of Kathleen Michael (Ada) marvellously conveyed her ghostly being, while still managing to make her presence almost tangible as she slips her shawl under Henry. Even Ada's aggressiveness is subdued when she explains to Henry that the riding and piano lessons were necessary for the good education of their daughter Addie. Yet one could wonder if Beckett does not play on the assumed notion that dead people always sound blank and monotonous ("*low remote voice throughout*").

The sea offers a discrete background noise to the play. Although Henry complains about its omnipresence, we only hear it intermittently, which accentuates the idea of a return-of-the-repressed embodied by the sea to some extent ("*sea [...] audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated*"). Beckett plays its usual lulling effect on people (including us, listeners) against the anxiety it triggers in Henry. The play can be seen/heard as a battle of noises, in which each opponent (Henry vs the sea) tries to drown out the other. The indifferentiate roar of the sea was compared to what is called the 'white noise', *i.e.* a noise containing all the frequencies with equal intensities (from the analogy with the 'white light'). In so far as ghosts in the play are reduced to voices (as opposed to Henry who displays a greater degree of materiality with his boots crunching on shingle), the sea and its haunting impact on the character can be seen as an allegory of a troubled memory from which Henry summons his ghosts or is assaulted by them.

Other echoes can be found in the play : literary resonances of Shakespeare, Yeats and Victorian ghost stories mainly. A reference to *The Merchant of Venice* ("How far that little candle throws its beams!/So shines a good deed in a naughty world", v, i. 90-91) and perhaps to *The Tempest* with its story of a son stranded on a beach, mourning his drowned father. There are almost too obvious Christian hints (see his calls on "Christ" and his lament for being forsaken by his father). The script and the sound of riding hooves recall Yeats's play —aptly entitled— *Purgatory* (1939): "Listen of the hoof-beats! Listen!, listen! [...] Beat! Beat!". *Embers* displays the same embeddedness as *Purgatory*, which tells the story of a father who tells his son how he killed his own father (the boy's grandfather) and ends up killing his boy on stage. In a similar fashion, Henry treats his daughter the way his father treated him. In Yeats's play, the ghost of the old man's mother (the boy's grandmother) appears at the window of a ruined house as a young girl awaiting her drunk husband As Ada relives her sexual experience with Henry on the beach, the old man in *Purgatory* 'witnesses' the night his mother and father begot him. The cameo scenes between Holloway and Bolton, with their nocturnal paraphernalia (hangings, fireplace, candles, trembling hands, red dressing-gown, drug addiction) call Stevenson and other Victorian writers to mind.

Several levels of reality are mingled in the play. There are obviously different planes of 'existence', which can be summed up under at least four headings : real, fiction, memory, ghosting. Beckett does not assign each plane a different voice/actor : fiction and reality are 'played' alike by Henry (no stage directions indicate a change of tone in the enactment of the Holloway & Bolton scenes), whereas Ada and Addie seem to be incarnations of ghosting and memory respectively. However the playwright has chosen two ways for fanning his ember-like characters : directness and indirectness. Thus, Ada seems to appear at Henry's side and vanish at her will, while Addie is first conjured up through mimicry, then in two painful memories. But are they memories as such (did Henry attend his daughter's lessons?) or imagined moments of Addie's past or present life (it is impossible to say whether she is still alive)? One thing for sure is that Addie can't attend both her piano and riding lessons at the same time. What could make of Addie's evocations mere hallucinations is the fact they are "suddenly cut off" like Henry's phantom drip. The family romance with all its traumas is unmistakably there (another nod in the direction of Yeats).

But memories are not exclusively about Addie. Henry recounts memories of his father by imitating his voice in the first soliloquy and Ada relives her loss of virginity on the beach in the following dialogue between husband and wife. What makes the play so intriguing is the fact that memory is not apprehended in a unique fashion. It is either repeated (through voice imitation), narrated (Ada recounting the day she saw Henry's father sitting on a rock), fantasized (Addie's lessons), recreated (Henry's refashioning of the story told by Ada) or even 'incarnated' by ghosts. In addition to this, Beckett does not clearly separate his protagonists according to their level of existence : Henry, Addie and Ada are given the same typographical treatment, *i.e.* they appear as three 'real' characters on the page, although the mother and daughter are not exactly 'there'.

The beach as an emblematic liminal space is of course a perfect setting for the play's distortion of boundaries. Are the voices outside or inside Henry's mind? Is the seascape an auditory hallucination (Henry complains about the sea in Switzerland and Ada doubts that he truly hears it) ? How come Ada can slip her shawl under Henry if she is incorporeal ? No other medium than the radio and its liminal 'audience' (the ear, the tympanum) could have better played the trick.

The medium itself is the closest correlation of an incorporeal experience. The interesting thing about aural signals is that people are less inclined to doubt their reality than that of visual stimuli. Sound is on the one hand undeniable and, on the other, intangible; it's never there, one never knows its origin or source for certain. Beckett may rely here on the uncertainty attached to the origin of sound and especially of the human voice. A parallel could be made with the novels (the trilogy, notably), which indefatigably doubt speech and voice as the ultimate reference of subjectivity.

Beckett's paradoxical endeavour to question sound in this radio play is also achieved through the use of grossly-made sound effects (coconut-like sound of hooves, exaggerated amplifications of Addie's cries, *etc.*). Even Henry, by calling attention to the sound of the sea, takes part in debunking the referential authority of the medium; to his blind father and to a blind audience, he explains "that sound you hear is the sea

[...] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was."

The temporal structure of sound forces you to stop and listen in order to understand it, as opposed to vision's claim to immediate comprehensiveness. This is a play that is intensely about listening, more perhaps than any other radio play, and about the ghostly visions that impalpable radiophonic waves create.

Notes by Stéphanie Ravez