

London Beckett Seminar 26 Feb 2004.

Fizzle One: He is Barehead Continued...

We this time read from where we had left off in January ("... intricate and faint of the body on its way.") to the final sentence, in the hope that this would free us up not only to focus commentary upon a specific sentence or phrase but also to remark on the piece as a whole. We began by considering, generally, what the 'he' is wearing, focusing specifically on "of the clothes, singlet and trousers, espousing and resisting the movements of the body, coming unstuck from the damp flesh and sticking to it again, tattering and fluttered where in tatters already by sudden flurries as suddenly stilled".

Trying to reconcile the images we had so far been visualising (for those of us who had them) with the impressions given by this specific piece of narrative, we wondered how the wetness corresponded to the 'tattering' and 'fluttered;' what it was about this section that inscribed confusion in to its reading; and precisely how the 'as suddenly still' sat in relation to the sentence as a whole. To this latter query, we decided the most logical way to rephrase it would be: 'as suddenly as the flurries happen, they are (as suddenly) still.' Noting the alliteration and syntactical oddity, it was discerned that it was possible to see a mimetic process at work; the material surface of the language being scrutinised was itself tattered. Also, we observed upon glancing back to the start, that it begins as a sentence about sound, a concern which could be seen to move from sheer content into a more formatic embodiment: the alliteration, for instance, works to create phonic effects as much as it does images. This perspective naturally supported our increasingly confused ideas of what could be visualised here (or perhaps grew out of this).

Starting off in what at the time seemed a simple manner, such questions were asked as: how can the 'fluttered,' which connotes dryness, be reconciled with this wet environment? Is it still wet? Clearly it is, as we are told in the very same sentence about 'damp flesh,' and 'wet ground.' Does 'fluttered' work as verb, indicating a kind of memory (when the tatters/clothes were dry, they were fluttering?), and if it does, how does this relate to the frustrated notions of memory/ History that follow? The questions piled up (in much the same way as Walter Benjamin perceives the catastrophic pile up of History in *Illuminations*) disproportionately to satisfactory answers, and we moved back to a more generalised reading.

It was clear, upon taking a step back from the text that the tatter is very much a Beckettian figuration. It goes by other names: the ember, the ruin, the broken. Potential faded glory, although the colour of faded glory is

perhaps not grey, the Beckettian 'colour' par excellence. The Derridean trace was brought into the discussion - the cinder - which not only provides a way in which to perceive the Beckettian tatter in a generalised way, but also suggested the temporal dimension of those types of fragments already discerned in the Beckett text: the tatter, the ember, the ruin all correspond to the 'nothing new,' still perhaps working but barely, but also, and more significantly, to an after-effect of some sort. A process of ageing has invariably taken place. And these figures of the tattered, the ruined, the landscapes of ash, the references to bones, are all of significance for the *Fizzles* as a collection, of course: the reader finds these same motifs throughout.

Returning briefly to the proposal that the sentence seemed to be fundamentally concerned with sound, it was remembered that in *Footfalls* it is not only the steps the audience hear, but also the rustle of the clothes. An idea was bodied forth of the sounds of tattering working in the same manner as the rustle of the clothing, the noises of tattering working against, or interrupting, the pattern of walking, which could potentially act as a marker of time. We were reminded of the moment in *All That Fall* when Henry tries but fails to use the sound of walking, the strangely echoing horse hooves, to act as a metronome to measure and mark the passage of time: "hooves! [...] Again! [...] Train it to mark time! Shoe it with steel and tie it up in the yard, have it stamp all day. A ten-ton mammoth back from the dead, shoe it with steel and have it tramp the world down!" (CDW 253). It was put forward that the interfering sound here - the rustling or the tattering - could also be read as a marker of time, although this would most certainly be a different kind of time, and possibly working in the direction of entropy, the sound of falling apart, of wearing (eroding): time's arrow.

The section next designated for analysis was the following: "He has already a number of memories, from the memory of the day he suddenly knew he was there, on this same path still bearing him along, to that now of having halted to lean against the wall, he has a little past already, even a smatter of settled ways. But it is all still fragile. And often he surprises himself, both moving and at rest, as destitute of history as on that first day, on this same path, which is his beginning, on days of great recall." Does he 'surprise[] himself (...) on this same path'? Does he surprise himself because he is so destitute of history that his 'coming across' himself (or being made aware of himself) should be seen as the first time, and hence carry with it the shock of the new (i.e. is it a joke)?

An idea whose kernel lay in the discussion of the two markers of time (in the previous section) returned to be developed more fully here: it seemed clear that there were two contradictory impulses at work in the notion of history, his 'little past.' On the one hand, there is what appears to be an

urging on of the reader, an urging into the arms of the progressive, teleological mode of thought; on the other, there is the frustration of this process, and a tendency towards entropy, the antithesis. In what might be a negative dialectical play, synthesis never quite materialises. Instead, what we are faced with is incessant oscillation: no choice is made between the one or the other.

The second "But it is all still fragile" (which follows the above passage) prompted the question as to whether or not things can grow less fragile, as the sentence seemed to suggest. It was also suggested that it could be perceived as a reinforcing of the previous "But it is all still fragile," which might work to negate those parts of the in-between sentences where a progressive strain of thought is dangled, carrot-like, asserting as it does the previous statement once more, as though that is all that needed to be said. But, then, how pertinent are questions of necessity here? It did not need to be said for a progressive narrative, but this is not a progressive narrative, as a whole.

The use of the word "passage" was noted, further into the text, and the pun occasioned discussion of exchange, the passing between people, that the word implies, and we wondered how extensively the notion of (the) 'passage' could be applied to the Fizzles as a collection, as it appeared quite clearly to be of importance in 'He is barehead,' from the tunnel-like passages that 'he' walks, or climbs, to the passage of writing, both literally (the reading process) and figuratively. If the short is to be viewed as passage, where is it leading us? Is the passage, in fact, the readers' "lingering collapse" as they attempt to form a coherent picture, based on a logical hermeneutic, and come up with nothing more or less than tatters?

As we rounded up the session, the question of how far these shorts belong together, how far they relate to each other in the collection, was thrown out. Skipping slightly ahead of ourselves, we glanced at a part of the final sentence: "... such as these bones of which more very shortly ..." and wondered if "these bones" might not be read as "these shorts; these prose fragments," in which case, it might be possible to perceive the *Fizzles* as bones, tatters of something once whole and unified, brought together in a constellation, the passage between each nodal point perhaps intuited rather than deduced.

Lenya Samanis