



METAPOETIC SPECULATION IN/ON TOM BECKETT'S "THIS POEM"

Thomas Fink

Collected in *This Poem/ What Speaks?/ A Day* (Rockhampton, Australia: Otoliths, 2008), Tom Beckett's "This Poem" is an anaphoric catalogue of "this poem's" intentions, actions, properties, and attributes, as well as a few evaluative statements. A third-person "narrator" always speaks on behalf of the poem, and yet it seems as though no author has intended the "actions" represented. The very last sentence alludes to and, thus, implicitly undoes this central omission: "This poem/ Pretends not/ To know me" (13).

Although Beckett (or the speaker he posits) ventriloquistically attributes the ability to pretend not to know (which also indicates the potential to know something) to words that he has put there, merely asserting that the personification pervading the poem is an illusion seems obvious and fruitless. The fantasy of poem as agent bespeaks the writer's desire to transcend both his own intentions and reader's misprision so that the poem's "independent" "truth" can emerge. And the poet is probably also banking on the attractiveness of this fantasy to his readers. In reading "This Poem," one can exercise, to borrow W.E.B. duBois' phrase for a very different purpose, "double consciousness": s/he can take pleasure in the fantasy *and* examine the relationship between poet, text, and reader through what the words can be made to say and what possibilities of articulation they seem to omit.

Here are the opening strophes of "This Poem":

This poem

Proffers

Its ass.

This poem

Penetrates me. (7)

If the poem is an object of desire (a felicitous means of sublimating desire for a human being) for the reader, then the dream of active or passive "sexual" "contact" is pleasurable, because it bypasses the need to engage with the author and his intentions. In the case of the author ("me") as reader, he is "penetrated" by the poem to the extent that, after writing it, he realizes things about his own thinking that previously were at an unconscious level. (Throughout this essay, I use "his" and "he" to refer to the poet rather than a set of gender-neutral designations, because Beckett happens to be male.) On the other hand, exposure to the poet or poem's "ass" can be an insult to the reader rather than a promise of sexual/textual fulfillment. ("*Hypocrite lecteur, kiss my ass.*") Also, being penetrated by a text may be a scary experience.

Moving to the second phase of double consciousness, "poem" is a trope for "poet" or, at least, the realization of his intention in the poem *and* whatever signifying possibilities escape his conscious operations. In this sense, the author uses language to proffer to the reader his own "ass" (his actual buttocks or psychological vulnerability?) or a surrogate ass, the conceptual backside of the poem (as an entity formed by the poem out of the materials of his culture as well as his own life). A later sentence, "This poem/ Wants to/ Get to/ Know you. (9)," implies that the poet builds into his poem the sense that he and, by extension, it care about their readership's subjectivity. After all, a poem that gives the impression of contempt for or indifference about its readers will probably be ignored. But caring is not a synonym for knowing. Beckett exposes the structural absence of poet and poem from the fulfillment of the desire for knowledge. One may posit a dream of intersubjectivity: the poet

presents his experience in ways that allow the reader to comprehend their common ground, and so, by “knowing” himself, he knows another indirectly. However, proof of the success of intersubjectivity through writing is elusive.

Also, there is no guarantee that the poet or poem’s offer of its ass includes delivery; seduction is not necessarily access, and the reader’s encounter with multiple—at times, irreconcilable—meanings may ensure that no single promise is realized.

As for the second sentence, the poet not only penetrates others with his thinking; he penetrates his (divided) self: expression does not consolidate the expresser’s confidence either in his unified identity or in his coherent representation of his perceptual experience; it exposes its disunity, gaps, imperfections, and provisional character.

The poem, poet, and reader can all be seen as penetrating and penetrated; further, each encloses contexts and exists within them:

This poem
Is parenthetical.

This poem
Is embedded
Within ____.

This poem
Operates among
Focal points

This poem
Eschews
The copula. (7-8)

“This poem” surrounds and encloses data or subject matter, but it is also situated within larger frames, including a book in which it is the first of three long poems, and many more

frames that can be identified. Because the poem's "focal points" are multiple, these "parentheses" are fragile, vulnerable to being expanded or contracted. A thesis or center does not stabilize the text's operation, posit self-identification, or serve as foundation for any other fixed equation; this constitutes a rejection of "the copula," even if various forms of the verb "to be" appear. If "this poem/ Is embedded/ within" a reader's prior experience of Beckett's work, s/he may already anticipate this resistance and accept it in advance. In such a case, when encountering the sentence, "This poem/ Resembles/ A statement" (8), the reader can focus on the verb as indication that the text is comprised of numerous assertions that, according to conventional modes of meditation, may be expected to coalesce into one thesis, but that these "statements" do not and will not resolve their differences. On the other hand, if the reader is not familiar with Beckett's earlier writing and strongly desires a thesis, s/he will find a disclaimer, along with a warning against this kind of search for unity.

While there is evidence that "this poem/ Gets up/ And does/ Something" (9)—not so much leaving the page, except when read aloud, but provoking responses from its writer and readers—the question of the value of these "actions" is important. The sentence, "This poem/ Is a form/ Of waste/ Management" (10), appears to be mere self-deprecation, yet "waste management" is not confined to disposal or containment. (See Eileen R. Tabios' "Garbage: A True Story," in her *Silences: The Autobiography of Loss* [Espoo, Finland & West Hartford, CT: blue lion books, 2007] for her provocative consideration of waste and its uses.) The *formal* recycling of the author's thought, which is wasted when it goes in and out of his mind without impact in the social realm, into something of potential value to be shared with readers is a "scheme" ("This poem/ Schemes") that also permits the reader to manage his/her own previously "wasted" thoughts by bringing them into contact with the poet's. "This poem/ Teeters" because one is never sure in the act of writing and reading whether "waste management" will turn out to be garbage disposal or "asset management." Value and evaluation are not given *a priori*; they are negotiated.

In poststructuralist theory, language is frequently presented as "speaking" or "constituting" human beings rather than the other way around. This makes sense because, even if human beings invented words, each individual is initiated into a pre-existing language with

structures and significations that exert some (and often great) control over whatever one tries to say. When Beckett uses personification to refer to "This Poem's" self-referential features, I surmise that it is in the service of this poststructuralist way of thinking:

This poem
Considers
Its losses.

This poem
Stares into
A mirror.

This poem
Plays
With itself.

This poem
Is the body
In question.

This poem
Works
The room.

This poem
Is an
Empty
Container.

This poem's
Raptures rupture
A repertoire. (11)

Beckett has constructed "This Poem" to *reflect* on its own status as poetry and to enable readers to recognize and contemplate this, but many deconstructionists and Foucaultians would say that the text "does" this whether or not the author has sought to include such reflection or the reader to perceive it. "Losses" include failures to represent, and "this poem/ Considers" them by indicating, for example, the distance between signifier and signified. The simultaneity of a poem's enactment of representation ("This poem") and its investigation of ("Stares into") how the process works ("A mirror") bespeaks the doubling of the poem's "self," which linguistic "play" reveals. If staring into a mirror yielded the full "self," then "This poem/ Plays" would suffice as the sentence. Further, the text's status as a single "body" of work is not self-evident; it is put "in question," or, since the text resembles the human body, its exploration of corporeal reality is comparable to questioning how the body interacts with representation and the social. From the second perspective of double consciousness, writer and audience "stare" at doubleness "in" or "of" the work, which serves as a mirror for their own thinking, and they "play with" that double feature and question its "bodily" manifestations.

To "work the room" is to ingratiate oneself with others, but also to occupy available space to produced effects. Moving from the trope of a "room" to "container," a much smaller box, the next sentence seems to sound a sharp departure, not only from its predecessor, but from the idea of the poem as agent in most of the prior statements, but it relies on a different perspective on the text that nevertheless jibes theoretically with the "mirroring" "play" discussed above. To call the text "an/ Empty/ Container" is to define it either as aesthetic form preceding content—"this poem" strangely held apart from language's actual effects—or as a construct of words "empty" of meaning that is univocal and objectively determined. While different readers "fill" the "container" in divergent ways, the poem embodies emptiness if one apprehends it separately from its (subjective) audience. "Rapture" is an energy "in" the poem or poet or reader that gives pleasure by rupturing "repertoires" of problematic constraints; with the rich linking of noun and verb through sound, this energy becomes the opposite of "empty" "containment," except that the effect of "rupture" empties out what is clotting the mind or linguistic terrain so that freedom can be enjoyed.

Beckett's poem is no primer of poststructuralist theory, however much the theory plays a role in it. Remember my mention of the text's last sentence in the first paragraph, and I will now reunite it with its immediate predecessors:

This poem
Multiplies.

This poem
Subdivides.

This poem
Posits
A rhetorical
Stance.

This poem
Pretends not
To know me. (13)

"Multiplying" and "subdividing" theoretical postulates through tropes and abstract assertions are not the same as presenting a single theoretical position, even a deconstructive non-thesis. In many a sentence, "A rhetorical/ Stance" can be gleaned, but the reader does not find the same one from one strophe to another. In the unpredictable multiplication enabled by the catalogue structure, the reader will often be motivated to contemplate the poem's (implied or wholly unstated) dependence on him/herself and the author, will sometimes find that articulations of language's self-generative aspects can be reconciled with those readerly and writerly forces, and will also, at times, appreciate how "This poem/ Gets up/ And does/ Something" that may not depend on human intervention.