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Pireddu, Nicoletta. "Sublime Supplements: Beckett and the 'Fizzling Out' of Meaning," selected for inclusion in *The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Cathleen Culotta Andonian (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1998): 391-401 [originally published in *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (3), 1992: 303-314; also selected for inclusion in *Apmonia*, a web literary resource on Beckett].

Collection Permanent Link: <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/559396>

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Sublime Supplements: Beckett and the "Fizzling Out" of Meaning

By Nicoletta Pireddu

"Perhaps there is no whole, before you're dead" (Beckett 1955, 35), meditates Molloy while lying in the ditch without remembering how he left town. If his name suddenly comes to his mind as in an epiphany, the purpose of his visit to his mother inevitably escapes him: "My reasons? I had forgotten them" (Beckett 1955, 35). For each detail brought to light, other particulars are reabsorbed into forgetfulness. The activity of memory never provides the character with the total picture of his own self. Its discrete nature frustrates the need for continuity; its inability to fill the gaps opened up by oblivion reveals the arbitrariness of any attempt to master reality, and the inconclusiveness of Molloy's writing registers exactly the failure of such an effort.

If in *Molloy* the protagonist narrates the story of a fiasco, Beckett's *Fizzles* represent the fiasco of narration itself. Starting from their titles, both the English and the French version of these short texts exhibit the idea of aborted endeavor as their constitutive element. Voices with no faces recite confused monologues in the hopeless attempt to put order into their past lives; third-person accounts on the verge of syntactical disintegration describe endless wanderings not redeemed by any promise of final revelation; physically impaired bodies struggle against a hostile nature, in the awareness of an impending death. The topology of *Fizzles* is a paradoxical middle ground between defeat and accomplishment. Far from implying total renunciation, the failure announced at the opening of the collection triggers an attempt at depiction that is doomed to incompleteness: to the danger of silence and of annihilation, Beckett's texts oppose a fictional world of traces that hint at wholeness without ever granting access to it. Ruins, decaying bodies, and blurred memories materialize the interplay of presence and absence of meaning that the language of *Fizzles* reproduces with its imminent and yet never-achieved dissolution.

Through their conceptual and structural fragmentation, these *Fizzles* dismantle exactly what Adorno defines as art's "unfulfilled (and imprescriptible) longing for perfection" (1984, 271)[1], and by articulating the unresolved struggle between destructive forces and self-preservation they meet the "challenge of the irreconcilable" (AT 271). Beckett's literary "fiascos" belong, for this reason, to the category of the sublime, the ascendance of which -- according to Adorno -- coincides with "the need for art to avoid 'playing down' its fundamental contradictions but to bring them out instead" (AT 282). In *Fizzles*, the disruption of form and meaning under the effect of such a clash of forces reveals an essential feature of the contemporary sublime, namely, its being latent. If "the traditional concept of the sublime as an infinite presence was animated by the belief that negation could bring about positivity" (AT 282), the irreconcilable conflicts of Beckett's texts break this illusion and offer an example of "radical negativity" (AT 284). No longer associated with the sense of awe

and of subsequent power that defined it in the Kantian version, the sublimity of a literary work like *Fizzles* derives precisely from its margin of unrepresentability, and from the inadequacy of any attempt to penetrate it. Deprived of the aggrandizement that characterizes the Romantic participation in the source of the sublime, these texts rather involve the agonizing experience of characters suspended between physical destruction and recovery of integrity, between oblivion and memory.

With the frantic activity of recollection recurring and yet failing throughout *Fizzles*, Adorno's "radical negativity" merges with Lyotard's notion of the unrepresentable as "Forgotten," as something that remains immemorial and unthought. Beckett's "imperfect" texts express the sublime by calling attention to an excess of meaning and of reality that cannot be recuperated but only evoked through its absence; their words represent precisely

what every representation misses, what is forgotten there: this "presence" ...which persists not so much at the limits but rather at the heart of representation; this unnameable in the secret of names, a forgotten that is not the result of a forgetting of a reality...and which one can only remember as forgotten "before" memory and forgetting, and *by repeating it* (Lyotard 1990, 5)[2].

1. Re-membering/Dis-membering

It is exactly the notion of a perpetual reenacting that animates Beckett's *Fizzles*, in spite of the failure to which these texts are doomed by definition: the repetitive pattern described by Lyotard sustains the collection as a whole and is epitomized in the title of the last Fizzle, "For to end yet again" (Beckett 1976a, 55)[3]. Far from granting a stronger mastery of reality and of meaning in the narration, the dynamics of endless repetition that truncates the texts before they attain a logical conclusion or a potential revelation implies exactly an act of *re*-presentation deprived of presentation and of presence.[4]

The movement suggested at the opening of Fizzle 1 is immediately reduced to a mere act of oscillation that anchors the subject to its initial position: "he is forth again, he'll be back again" (F, 7). However, in spite of this yoke, the subject gropes his way in the dark and starts a quest set in a labyrinthine site that is both material and mental. Proceeding along a zigzag path -- that is, not sustained by the teleological linear progression toward a target -- and frustrated in his "effort to pierce the gloom" (F, 9), he manages to relive some episodes of his past life but without ever being able to give a global shape to his history. As in Molloy's experience, the unearthing of a detail from oblivion implies the burial of other elements, and reveals simultaneously the inefficacy of the quest and the impossibility of putting an end to it. Similarly, after a series of encounters with Horn and an investigation into the past through his notes, the speaker of the monologue in Fizzle 2 has to acknowledge his failure and, still confused about time and temporal relations, avows the need for a new beginning:

I thought I had made my last journey, the one I must now try once more to elucidate, that it may be a lesson to me, the one from which it were better I had never returned. But the feeling gains on me that I must undertake another. (F, 22)

The paradoxical coexistence of renunciation and undertaking of new endeavors persists in Fizzles 3 and 4, where the first-person speaker "gave up before birth" (F, 25) and declares his impotence by emphasizing his lack of voice and of thought, but still sets himself the task of narrating the story of the "other" consciousness in the piece: "I'll tell the tale, the tale of his death" (F, 31) -- a tale and a death which never take place. All these aborted attempts and their reiterated necessity are absorbed in the closing statement of Fizzle 8, which strengthens the process of *re*-presentation implied by the title and provides no alternative to eternal beginning.

Through it who knows yet another end beneath a cloudless sky same dark it earth and sky of a last end if ever there had to be another absolutely had to be. (F, 61)

The act of writing and the performance of the characters in Beckett's texts are in the service of a mechanism of *re*-remembering which is at the same time a *dis*-remembering. In *Fizzles*, memory cannot reestablish a peaceful continuity between past and present; no edifice of totality can be reconstructed from the fragments of their topology. It is primarily the additional connotation of the words *fizzle* and *foirade* -- as well as the status of these texts vis-à-vis Beckett's literary production as a whole -- that throws further light upon the role of traces and remains, and consequently upon their relation with Lyotard's treatment of the sublime. Actually, the idea of failure in both the English and the French heading is combined with a reference to excrements and to uncontrolled corporal functions that establish the *residual* nature of this collection with respect to the *body* of the author's work. These texts are condemned -- by definition -- to occupy a marginal place in Beckett's aesthetic project, since they are conceived as excretions that can no longer be integrated within the original source that generated them. Therefore, they constitute an example of "radical fragmentation, pursued to its logical end of dispersion and multiplicity" (Hill 1984, 175). Given their shattered structure, the failure of these "fizzles" is extended to their lack of "organic self-coincidence" (Hill 1984, 176): they do not merely stand for the expelled remainders of a non-existent whole, but they are also residual in relation to their own self-containedness.

The title of the collection, in this respect, anticipates the "supplementary" quality of the ruins and traces upon which memory inscribes its project of reconstruction. As in the text of the Freudian unconscious, the fragments that recur throughout Beckett's texts are residual in themselves: far from functioning as synecdoches for a totality that asks to be retrieved, they are "repositories of a meaning which was never present" (Derrida 1978, 211)[5]. Being "always already" incomplete, these supplements cannot but compensate imperfectly for the lack of plenitude they decree. Like Lyotard's

notion of "the jews" (Lyotard 1990, xxiii) as those devoid of self-identity and of mythical origin, the residues in *Fizzles* stimulate and frustrate the desire for a wholeness and a presence that cannot be *re*-collected, neither through the material assemblage of the fragments, nor through an act of memory. The Forgotten plenitude - the source of the sublime -- has to remain forgotten, but it needs memory in order to be remembered as such. It must not be naturalized by representation, nor suppressed and effaced by oblivion, but rather venerated through the aborted efforts to appropriate and represent it. In the agonizing space of Beckett's texts, the condemnation to eternal beginning becomes the only way to maintain this precarious balance of annihilation and preservation. By endlessly reenacting a drama of disintegration that does not culminate with death, Beckett can avoid concluding, since "to terminate" -- to put an end to his "fizzles" -- would coincide with "to exterminate" -- namely, to destroy the "place of remains" (F, 55), the locus of the conflictual forces that allow the sublime to come into being. With the extermination of these traces, *anamnesis* would turn into *amnesia*. Representation would still belong to the realm of the beautiful; it could still rely on "the solace of good forms" (Lyotard 1986, 81), but only through an arbitrary act -- through the exclusion of those residual elements whose formlessness evokes exactly the unrepresentable, the sublime.

The failed attempt at recollection and the material presence of remainders as supplements for the unrepresentable emerge from the opening page of Fizzle 1 -- where "none of [the character's] memories answer" (F, 7) -- and are reinforced in its closing comment -- with the surfacing of bones as the "fresh elements" (F, 15) that "contribute to enrich" (F, 15) the impossible reconstruction of the character's past history. Bones are combined with "grit" (F, 27) and "dust" (F, 32) to anticipate the physical consumption of the two voices in Fizzles 3 and 4, but -- together with the ruins of the landscape -- they simultaneously affirm their material presence as opposed to the total effacement implied by death. Nature joins man in the process of mechanical decay, and -- as shown in Fizzle 5 -- can be remembered only through "dead leaves" (F, 39), "not rotting" (F, 39) -- since this would still reaffirm a form of life, though elementary, and therefore a positive, organic principle of reconstruction -- but rather "[c]rumbling into dust" (F, 39). The "place of remains" (F, 55) in Fizzle 8 "where once used to...glimmer a remain" best epitomizes the supplementary nature of these texts by indicating exactly the lack of initial plenitude and presence in a kind of *mise en abyme*. Equally, through the reference to "the expelled" (F, 56) that is engulfed in dust mingling with the remainders of buildings, Beckett reinstates precisely the idea of detachment from an original totality and the impossible reintegration that define the residual quality of *fizzle* and *foirade*. [6]

This process of inexorable fragmentation is inscribed in the image of the agonizing skull to which Fizzle 8 reduces its protagonist: the mind that in the Romantic sublime should struggle against a prostrating experience and ultimately regain its power and integrity is metonymically translated into its material container, which acts as a

memento mori. Death as forgetfulness can only be remembered through a perishable relic; the activity of memory that should re-collect the *disjecta membra* of Beckett's characters can only be "laughable" (F, 58): the unrepresentable -- the "Forgotten" -- needs remembrance in order to be saved from oblivion, but at the same time it decrees the uselessness of any attempt at representation. If the ritual of turning the light on and off seems to grant the characters the restoration of their past (Rabinovitz 1983, 318) and of their sense of selfhood, it actually provides only disconnected flashes of memory: the "electric torch" (F, 19) does not clarify the forgotten details of the past contained in Horn's notebook; the light of the bulb is equally ineffective to unify the "faces, agonies, loves,...[m]oments of life" (F, 44) recalled by the protagonist of Fizzle 6; the glimmering "remains" (F, 55) of subjectivity, of monuments and of the "light of the day" (F, 55), are the metaphors through which memory exhibits its inadequacy to illuminate the shadow surrounding it.

2. A writing of survival

"The understanding" -- observes Lyotard -- "imposes its rules on to all objects, even aesthetic ones. This requires a time and a space under control" (1990, 41). *Fizzles* shrinks from such kind of naturalization by altering precisely these two parameters: time acquires the value of Heideggerian temporality -- thus reducing the character to being-toward-death -- and space is threatening in its vastness and monotony.[7] Like a parodic double of Ishmael meditating upon the whale's "dumb blankness full of meaning" (Melville 1988, 199) the "little body" in Fizzle 8 is also confronted with a "whiteness to decipher" (F, 58), but there is no ultimate revelation of its nature or of its origin: the "distant whiteness *sprung from nowhere*" (F, 59. My emphasis) takes the shape of two dwarfs who -- although possible harbingers of death -- are not unmasked in their function, and do not hinder the protagonist's slow but endless fall. He sees them with his eyes, eyes that "the fall has not shut nor yet the dust stopped up" (F, 60), therefore he believes in them. However, the sense of sight is actually entrusted to the mere "gaping sockets" (F, 60) of a "sepulchral skull" (F, 60). The ability to master reality through visual perception is thus affirmed and immediately denied: the protagonist's empty sockets put into question understanding and representability.

Through the physical and mental deterioration of its characters, *Fizzles* dramatizes the second phase of the Kantian sublime -- that is, it describes the annihilation of the subject under the effect of an overwhelming experience. Actually, the *Critique of Judgement* already presupposes the mind's inadequacy to grasp the source of the sublime (Kant 1987, 99): the unattainability of the object decrees precisely the failure of representation. Beckett's texts are founded upon a similar disproportion between the inner and the outer realm, between powerless bodies and minds, on the one hand, and uncontrollable destructive forces on the other. The characters face an external

reality that is in *excess* with respect to them: memory is no refuge from dissolution -- since it fails to provide a reassuring and organic image of the past -- and the present is absorbed by the threat of an imminent extinction. With the depiction of bodies in the ditch, Fizzle 5 -- which significantly bears the title "Se voir" in the French version (Beckett 1976b, 51) -- almost invokes death through its material ritual of burial, since the actual occurrence of death would at least redeem the purposeless agony of the characters by inserting it in a design. Similarly, the apostrophe at the beginning of Fizzle 6 turns the mythical image of the earth as source of regeneration into a metonymy for decease: "Old earth, no more lies...You'll be on me" (F, 43). However, the closing image in the collection frustrates once again this longing for resolution. The "little body" sinking into a wasteland of ruins and dust is "prostrate" (F, 60) and constantly falling "as though pushed from behind by some helping hand" (F, 60), but if there seems to be "no fear of [his] rising again" (F, 60), the logic of *Fizzles* -- "to end yet again" -- does not rescue him from life.

Nevertheless, whereas Kant's treatment of the sublime involves a subsequent reactive phase that reestablishes the balance between the mind and the object, Beckett's texts endlessly expand the moment of ego-loss without allowing any recovery. *Fizzles* neglects the aggrandizement that in the *Critique of Judgement* derives from the subject's identification with the transcendent source of the sublime: the sky has been "forsaken of its scavengers" (F, 59) and, all the more reason, it is no longer the locus of the divine as a force granting self-preservation and transcending human limitations. In the place of the *leap* of faith with which the Kantian subject can be *elevated* and have a revelation of his own sublimity, Beckett's characters experience a *downfall*: the unrepresentable haunts and *prostrates* them. Far from providing empowerment through identification, the sublime functions as a term of comparison against which skulls and little bodies can measure their own inadequacy and failure. In this respect, the etchings that Jasper Johns combines with one of the editions of *Fizzles* are symptomatic. The several images of legs that the painter juxtaposes to Beckett's words reinforce the very idea of powerlessness that characterizes the second stage of the Kantian sublime and that accounts for *Fizzles* as a whole. Actually, if the violent excitation aroused by the sublime experience can be equalled to sexual orgasm, the phallic aspect of the legs in Johns's illustrations invalidates precisely such an idea of energy: it rather suggests flabby and inoperative organs, detached from the body and doomed to impotence and to fiascos. [8]

In the world of *Fizzles* the "grey cloudless sky" (F, 57) conceals no transcendency; no Oversoul can elevate the self after its loss into a sublime Romantic nature. The unrepresentable and the threat of annihilation are therefore far from having a metaphysical origin: in their pathetic condemnation to a perennial purgatorial state, the little bodies and the skulls of *Fizzles* are rather deferring a disintegration that in postmodern, post-Hiroshima decades can be more easily associated with an atomic catastrophe. They are thus waiting for a Godot that does not possess any phonetic or

intrinsic affinity with God: instead of reassembling their mortal remains after their physical death in the resurrection of body and soul, the nuclear destruction that haunts them will dissolve any trace. The distinction made by Burke and Kant between love for the beautiful as something that the subject can dominate and admiration for the sublime because of its crushing impact upon the mind cannot subsist in the nuclear age. The instinct of self-preservation that arouses the resistance to the overwhelming forces of nature fails to master the threat of an irreversible annihilation with no remainders: obviously, the nuclear sublime does not afford the "empowerment of selfhood" (Wilson 1991, 236) entailed by natural phenomena in the Romantic aesthetic tradition. What the nuclear sublime lacks is the "safety distance" that allows the ultimate recuperation of mental power. Actually, in line with the impulse of self-preservation, the "delight" that for Burke is produced by the natural sublime derives not so much from the presence of pain and danger as from their removal (1990, 34): if they "press too nearly" (1990, 34) -- as in the case of the nuclear sublime -- they are merely "terrible."

Therefore, the dust, bones and ruins that constitute the fictional space of Beckett's texts, as well as the logic of eternal beginning that frustrates closure, assert themselves as a way of resisting the danger involved in an atomic holocaust -- namely, that of utter effacement with no remainders and no continuation. The falling fragments of buildings and bodies superimposing layer after layer in the wastelands of these stories create a testamentary *palimpsest* that -- despite the failure inscribed in its texture -- strives to dissipate the specter of the *tabula rasa* resulting from a nuclear devastation. To the amnesia of the nuclear fire -- the physical abolition of all that came before and its parallel elimination of all possible "after" -- *Fizzles* opposes anamnesis -- the thwarted but always renovated attempts at recollection that the characters make in the stories, and that the author undertakes through his own writing.

In the context of an impending risk of total abolition, Beckett's words are really an example of "writing of survival" (Lyotard 1990, 44), of an art that implies not so much a positive, life-affirming image -- which would be related to the reassuring category of the beautiful -- as an unresolved struggle for life, an effort to withstand hostile forces. Confronted with a negative excess, overwhelmed by a "too much," Beckett reacts with a "syntax of weakness" (Harvey 1970, 249) that articulates this life-and-death conflict. The act of writing -- although doomed to create mere "fizzles" -- exorcises the failure of imagination by exploiting imagination to depict failure. It is only through words that the reality of the nuclear disintegration can be evoked, and it is simultaneously through their inadequacy that the sublimity of this phenomenon can emerge. As an event that has not yet taken place, the nuclear conflict is "fabulously textual" (Derrida 1984, 23); it is a trope re-presenting a referent that is unfigurable and threatening in its unrepresentability.

Through his inexhaustible depiction of prostration in *Fizzles*, Beckett rhetorically simulates the stage of ego-shattering under the burden of the impending danger of its

effacement and puts off the actual experience of general destruction, which is incommensurate to language and thought. Far from attempting to unveil an event whose first occurrence would also be the last (Derrida 1984, 30), *Fizzles* proclaims that "There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing" (F, 37). The "ditch" (F, 37) that circumscribes the "closed place" (F, 37) of Fizzle 5 also describes cognitive limits: "nothing" (F, 37) lies beyond it, "no more" can be known. To jump over the ditch -- namely, to enact the experience of boundary crossing implied by the logic of the sublime -- in order to represent a nuclear catastrophe becomes an impossible task: the only condition for its realization is actual experience, but the price for such an irreversible step would be absolute destruction "without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth" (Derrida 1984, 27), ultimately without knowledge. The "day after" -- like the "after Auschwitz" for Lyotard -- has to be remembered as "Forgotten": *Fizzles* "does not say the unsayable but says that it cannot say it" (Lyotard 1990, 47).

3. Beckett "the expelled"

Nuclear annihilation extends to a universal level the paradoxical coincidence of meaning and inexpressibility that is inherent in death. With the destruction of the "entire archive" and of "all symbolic capacity" (Derrida 1984, 28) no "writing of survival" could be possible: there would be no relic upon which remembrance could inscribe its mourning. *Fizzles* emphasizes the sublime nature of death as an inaccessible moment of revelation and as the repository of unattainable meaning, but with its material and linguistic debris it resists precisely the threat of total silence.

In line with the interpretation of the sublime experience in terms of an Oedipal struggle followed by the identification with a father-figure, Kristeva assimilates death to the realm of the paternal symbolic order and defines Beckett's reaction to it as "an 'unnameable' interplay of meaning and jouissance" (1980, 148). Actually, the fragmented syntax of *Fizzles* is not merely an example of counter-symbolic writing totally oblivious of the paternal function: it rather re-members the father-figure as the guarantor of meaning in order to reduce it to a dismembered corpse, and mingles the veneration for the vestiges of meaning with the bliss of disruption. With its logic of eternal beginning, *Fizzles* does not exterminate the father once and for all: rather, it endlessly reiterates his ritual murder. On the other hand, the jubilation over having eliminated this linguistic authority does not imply total freedom. The banishment that is supposed to relieve the character -- as well as the author -- of the oppressing yoke of paternity and of the threat of death rather leads to the mourning for this lost presence.

However, no surrogate figure can replace this vacancy in the world of *Fizzles*, especially not the maternal image that in other texts by Beckett "becomes a mirage of serenity, shielded from death" (Kristeva 1980, 157). In the disintegrating space of

Fizzle 8, the mother is a crumbling "ruin" (F, 58) in the process of pulverization, and the only other reference to this figure deprives it of identity and of any relevant role: "he'll confuse his mother with whores, his father with a road-man named Balfe" (F, 27). With the elimination of these two vertices of the Oedipal triangle, Beckett is left with a "balance of nothingness" (Kristeva 1980, 152) suspended between a return to the womb -- perhaps evoked through the collapsing "refuge" (F, 56) to which the character does not wish to go back -- and the introjection of paternal authority. He therefore partakes of the supplementary nature of "the expelled" as deprived of an origin and of a destination, and shares with him a middle ground "where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further away" (F, 60) -- where neither nostalgia for the beautiful nor euphoria for a new source of self-elevation reigns.

The ritual of deterioration and the logic of the supplement materially embodied in the "remains" of Beckett's *Fizzles* replace the aggrandizement of the subject in the Romantic sublime with a sense of exhaustion and of belatedness that is typical of postmodernism. Instead of gaining self-empowerment through the identification with a sublime paternal figure, Beckett exhibits his epigonic status as a "son who never enunciated himself as anything else", as "a false father who doesn't want to be a father" (Kristeva 1980, 150-51). If Wordsworth in Paris is overwhelmed by a French Revolution that possesses all the qualities of the Burkean sublime and that is thus identifiable with an ideology of power and originality, the post-Kantian sublime of Beckett's *Fizzles* is precisely the negation of such an ideology, and rather works to challenge its pretensions.

Notes

1. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically and abbreviated as AT.
2. My emphasis. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically and abbreviated as HJ.
3. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically and abbreviated as F.
4. If in the English version the idea of endless repetition emphasized in the title of the last text seems to throw light retrospectively upon the development of the collection as a whole -- thus still hinting at a possible teleology -- the French edition of *Fizzles* connects these texts in a different order. Significantly, "Pour finir encore" -- the French equivalent of *Fizzle 8* -- is located at the opening of the collection: in this way, it anticipates the structural and conceptual inconclusiveness that sustains the work in its entirety. In addition, by collapsing the distinction between the starting and the terminal point, the title reinforces the idea of aborted attempt that defines these texts.

Cf. Beckett 1976b. It is in the interplay of the two versions that Beckett's problematization of the act of writing and of representation emerges in its most disruptive aspect.

5. For the notion of ruins as supplements and for their connection with the impossible project of restoration through memory -- as shown in *Fizzles* -- see Derrida 1990, 68-71.

6. Because of these connotations, the "expelled" can also be defined in terms of Lyotard's "the jews."

7. The lack of control over time and space in Beckett's texts establishes a symptomatic contrast with the power that Marinetti proclaims over reality by taming exactly these two variables: "Human energy centupled by speed will master Time and Space." By glorifying "the beauty of speed" and the subsequent divine authority it provides, the avant-garde repudiates the weakness and the sense of exhaustion that characterize Beckett's postmodern universe. The "Futurist morality" aims at defending man "from the decay caused by slowness [and] by memory," the specters that fifty years later would haunt the fiction of *Fizzles*. Cf. Flint 1972, 94-95.

8. The legs separated from the body, as well as all the other corporal fragments in Johns's etchings, partake of the supplementary aspect of "fizzles" and "foirade": because of their discrete nature -- as revealed from one of the illustrations -- they cannot be made to cohere into a whole. They express the lack of self-identity and the residual quality that characterize the traces in Beckett's texts. For the collaboration of Beckett and Johns cf. Prinz 1980, 480-510; Shloss 1985, 153-168.

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