

WHAT GOES 'PING' IN BECKETT'S PING?

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Samuel Beckett's Ping, a brief prose narrative and residuum of an unfinished longer work, has attracted considerable debate since its first appearance in English in 1967.¹ However, critical readings of Ping have remained narrowly faithful to David Lodge's early summary of possible interpretations, which appeared the following year.² The consensus on the piece's 'plot', such as it is, is that 'Ping portrays an agitated consciousness seemingly in the last moments of life' – a reading which Susan Brienza describes as the 'standard' interpretation.³

Beyond this minimum, detailed readings are more speculative and less well substantiated. David Lodge is inclined to see Ping as referring, among other things, to Christ dying in the tomb - a peculiar heresy, especially when expressed by Lodge, a reasonably well-catechized Catholic. William Gass leans in another direction entirely, proposing that Ping is a version of 'the first act of creation'.⁴ Eyal Amiran synthesizes these two readings,

seeing both an end and a beginning, or embryonic re-beginning of life in the joined and bent legs of the first line:⁵ ‘All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn.’ On the subject of the word which gives Ping its title most commentators remain reticent, and defer to Lodge’s least determinate reading; Carla Locatelli demonstrates her agreement with Lodge by quoting his observation that “‘Ping’ itself is the most ambiguous word in the text precisely because it is the one least defined by any referential or structural function in ordinary usage’.⁶ The variation of possible referents enumerated by Lodge - that the ‘ping’ could be the noise of the ricochet of bullets, or of water dripping, of a bicycle bell, or a sanctus bell, or a typewriter bell, or indeed not a noise at all but a cypher for ‘God’ - tends to be replaced in most readings with the suspended possibility of all and none, underpinned by a critical suspicion that this enigmatic effect, that of a non-specific floating signifier, is exactly the effect intended by Beckett. So is it that the repeated word ‘ping’, which occurs 34 times in the text, may find itself reduced to a purely formal function, acting only as a term in a ‘pattern of repetition [which] holds the work together in a kind of spatial order’,⁷ and overwhelming the reader with its lack of significance.

Two of these readings correspond with the word's earliest usages: the OED cites 'ping' used to refer to the noise of rifle bullets in 1835, and to the noise of a typewriter's carriage return in 1930 (the OED's illustrative example of the intransitive verb is J. B. Priestley's usage of considerable precision, in Angel Pavement: 'The typewriters rattled and pinged.')

⁸ The allusive context of these usages, which connect the word with death and writing respectively, also seems appropriate to Beckett's work. But 'ping' is a specifically onomatopoeic word that is and has always been echoic of the metallic noise of machines of one kind or another, and in 1943 it gained a further usage, becoming the slang term for both the ultrasonic signal sent out, and the echo returned, in the use of sonar.⁹

To suggest a connexion between Beckett's 'ping' and the 'ping' of sonar equipment does not enlighten us greatly. But a related type of machine which, as Monty Python fans and those who frequent hospitals are well aware, also goes 'ping', might be a more likely referent. A number of different medical monitors make this distinctive, half-musical noise; the electrocardiograph, or ECG, is perhaps the best-known example. ECG monitors have been available commercially since 1911, but it was in the

early 1960s – a period when Beckett underwent repeated surgery – that bedside ECGs came into standard use.¹⁰

‘Ping’ is not the only term in Ping that suggests a medical context. The word ‘murmur’ (which occurs 9 times in the text, in the singular or plural form), when connected with ‘heart’, connotes in its auscultatory sense the rumbling rhythms heard through a stethoscope.¹¹ The word ‘trace’ (occurring 10 times) has a secondary meaning referring to the luminous line on an ECG’s oscilloscope, or the jagged line drawn by the oscillograph, the recording method which preceded the oscilloscope.¹²

This small but significant cluster of terms suggests that Ping depicts the restricted sensory experience of a hospital in-patient, who is indeed perhaps ‘in the last moments of life’, as Susan Brienza asserts, but who is connected to a piece of this monitoring machinery which measures the final moments with an unsteady sequence of pings – the echoes of a faltering heartbeat. Hugh Kenner perhaps came closest to describing Ping in such a way when he considered the uniqueness of the mise-en-scène, describing it as ‘a setting so overwhelming, so arbitrary, so referrable to

mechanical superintendence perhaps, or to some unknown physical laws, that it determines what little can occur.¹³

Certainly little occurs in Ping, the narrator rendered so passive that even verbs are beyond his capacities; but by this reading it is the ‘ping’ of an ECG which, echoing the narrator’s pulse, acts as the metronome of the narrating consciousness.

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¹ Samuel Beckett, Ping, in ‘Appendix II: Variants in the Works of Samuel Beckett, with Special Reference to Bing’, Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics. An Essay in Bibliography (Berkeley, 1970), 325-43 (341-3). Ping was first published in French as Bing (Paris, 1966); and in English in No’s Knife (London, 1967). The version I have used, in the abovementioned appendix, consists of all ten drafts of Bing / Ping, nine in French and one in English. As the piece is very short, covering barely two pages, I shall not refer again to page numbers when quoting from it.

² See David Lodge, 'Some "Ping" Understood', in Encounter, xxx (1968), 85-9; repr. in Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage, ed. by Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London, 1979), 291-301.

³ Susan Brienza, Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction (Norman and London, 1987), 173.

⁴ William H. Gass, 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction', in William H. Gass, Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York, 1972), 3-26 (13).

⁵ Eyal Amiran, Wandering and Home: Beckett's Metaphysical Narrative (Pennsylvania, 1993), 172.

⁶ Carla Locatelli, Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works After the Nobel Prize (Philadelphia, 1990), 69. The quotation is from Lodge, 301.

⁷ Lodge, 293.

⁸ See 'ping, v.², 1. a. quot. 1930'; also 'ping, *sb.*, a.' OED, 2nd edn., 1989: 'An abrupt ringing sound, such as that made by a rifle bullet in flying through the air, by a mosquito, the ringing of an electric bell, etc.'

⁹ 'ping, *sb.*, b.' OED, 2nd edn., 1989: 'A very short pulse of high pitched, usu. ultrasonic, sound such as is emitted by sonar; also, a pulse of audible sound by which this is represented to a user of such equipment'.

¹⁰ In fact, the first recording made by an electrocardiograph took place in 1887, but its value was not immediately recognized. See D. J. Rowlands, 'Electrocardiography', Oxford Textbook of Medicine, ed. by David A. Warrell and others, 4th edn. (Oxford, 2003), II, 859-79; also, for a fascinating history of the developments which led to such machines, see Stanley Joel Reiser, 'The Science of Diagnosis: Diagnostic Technology', Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine, ed. by W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London and New York, 1993), II, 826-51.

¹¹ ‘murmur, *sb.*, 1. a., b.’ OED, 2nd edn., 1989: ‘Subdued continuous or continuously repeated sound; an instance of this’, ‘A sound of this kind (whether normal or morbid) heard in auscultation’.

¹² ‘trace, *sb.*, I. 8. b., a.’ OED, 2nd edn., 1989: ‘The luminous line or pattern on the screen of a cathode-ray tube’, ‘[...] the traced record of a self-recording instrument [...]’.

¹³ Hugh Kenner, A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett (London, 1973), 180.