

**“An Image from a Past Life”:
Beckett’s Yeatsian Turn**

—Reciting from Yeats’s “Friends,” in coming to the lines
While up from my heart’s root
So great a sweetness flows
I shake from head to foot,
Sam would stand up and repeat them, saying “Imagine such
feeling—“So great a sweetness flows / I shake from head to
foot”—in amazement.
—Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett*¹

The powerful imprint of Yeats’s poetry on Beckett’s writing has generally been underestimated, largely, no doubt, because Beckett himself, in his younger days, could be quite sarcastic about what he took to be Yeatsian postures and mannerisms, making clear that the Yeats he did genuinely admire was not the famous poet but his younger brother, the painter Jack B. Yeats.² But as Anne Atik recalls in her absorbing memoir, “From 1959 on, especially when we were dining at home, Yeats was as often on the menu as Samuel Johnson and Dante” (60). Beckett knew dozens of Yeats poems by heart and recited them, Atik notes, in praise of their sonorities, as in his stressing of the *m*’s in the last stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium”: “. . . such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake” (Atik 60).

But it was not just a matter of the younger poet’s admiration for his elder’s superb ear. A more profound—and surprising—link between the two has to do with romantic love: Beckett came, in his later work, to have a special affinity for the Yeatsian obsession with what his long poem “The Tower” calls a “woman lost”—lost because of the poet’s own failure to make the necessary commitment. Beckett was hardly a Yeatsian “last Romantic”—indeed, he could confront the notion of passion only obliquely and parodically—but it was Yeats who, so to speak, gave Beckett the permission to explore the aporias, not of sexual failure as such, but of the failure *to* follow one’s inclinations, which animates such key Beckett plays as *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Words and Music*, and the late television piece . . . *but the clouds* . . .

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whose title is taken directly from Part III of “The Tower.”³

“So great a sweetness flows / I shake from head to foot”—Beckett, Atik notes in the passage I cite above, reacted to these lines from Yeats’s “Friends” with “amazement.” Why? The noun “sweetness,” on the face of it, is not only vague but a bit cloying—a throw-back, perhaps to the Yellow Nineties rhetoric of Yeats’s *Wind Among the Reeds* and *The Shadowy Waters*. But Yeatsian “sweetness,” as Beckett understood, had its own edge, perhaps best seen in the concluding stanza of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast our remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.⁴

This conclusion follows hard upon the poet’s assertion that he is “content to live it all again,” even if it means reliving the suffering that results from having “woo[ed] / A proud woman not kindred of his soul.” But Yeats did not arrive at this position easily: when, in his sixtieth year, he composed “The Tower,” the memory of his great failed love affair with Maud Gonne was still too painful to confront.

Yeats’s lyric meditation begins with the agonized question, “What shall I do with this absurdity— / O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature / Decrepid age that has been tied to me / As to a dog’s tail?” (Yeats 409). Although the poet’s sexual energy, his “Excited, passionate, fantastical / Imagination” have never been more powerful, passion, it would seem, is now inappropriate for him: it is time to “be content with argument and bid the Muse go pack,” to “deal / in abstract things.” But “The Tower” is by no means a conventional complaint against old age, a sentimental evocation of lost happiness. Rather, Yeats’s argument, here and elsewhere in the later poems and plays, is that the pain of old age is not a matter of illness or physical infirmity, but a form of frustration experienced by those who refused passion in their youth. Thus the roll-call of characters in Part II—those eccentrics destroyed by a surfeit of imagination, like the drunken admirers of Mary Hynes in the song of the blind poet Raftery—culminates in the evocation of the poet’s own poetic creation and alter ego, Red Hanrahan, the “old lecher with a love on every wind,” who understands the mysteries of sexual love:

... it is certain that you have
 Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing
 Plunge, lured by a softening eye,
 Or by a touch or a sigh,
 Into the labyrinth of another's being. (Yeats 413)

It is at this point (line 113) that Yeats poses the crucial question that later came to haunt Beckett:

Does the imagination dwell the most
 Upon a woman won or woman lost?
 If on the lost, admit you turned aside
 From a great labyrinth out of pride,
 Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
 Or anything called conscience once;
 And that if memory recur, the sun's
 Under eclipse and the day blotted out. (Yeats 413-14)

Labyrinth is the key word here: whereas Hanrahan, Yeats's idealized image of himself, is presented as able to "Plunge, lured by a softening eye ... Into the labyrinth of another's being," the poet himself was one who "turned aside" from that labyrinth, evidently "out of pride, / Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought / Or anything called conscience once." Yet now, as he paces on the "battlements," the memory of his beloved recurs, putting the sun "Under eclipse." In the cosmology of *A Vision*, written shortly before "The Tower," the reference is to the antithetical moonlight of Phase 15, the non-human phase of Unity of Being, which has momentarily triumphed. The full moon signals the eclipse of the sun (Phase 1). In memory, the poet can relive his passion.

Despite its obliquities, Yeats's stanza is rooted in his actual situation. The love affair (mostly Platonic) with Maud Gonne, an affair that lasted from the mid-nineties through Maud's two unhappy marriages, to his own precipitous marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917 (and emotionally well beyond that date), was not only subject to recurrent failure, but a failure that Yeats took to be his own, even though it was Maud who repeatedly turned him down.⁵ The most powerful account of this self-accusation comes in "The Cold Heaven":⁶

And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
 Riddled with light. Ah! When the ghost begins to quicken

FULCRUM

Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment? (Yeats 316)

The only way out, Yeats knew, was to forgive himself for his own “pride” and “cowardice.” He came to see that, as he put it in a note to “An Image from a Past Life” (1920): “Souls that are linked by emotion never cease till the last drop of their emotion is exhausted....Those whose past passions are unatoned seldom love living man or woman but those loved long ago” (Yeats 822–23). Hence the drive to “cast out remorse” that is the theme of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” “Demon and Beast,” and so many other later poems. And hence the turn in “The Tower” to the assertive cry of Part III, with its insistence that “Death and life were not / Till man made up the whole, / Made lock, stock and barrel / Out of his bitter soul.”⁷ Here is the astonishingly upbeat conclusion—a conclusion Beckett, so Anne Atik recalls (Atik 68–69), recited so admiringly:

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come—
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades,
Or a bird’s sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades. (Yeats 416)

In the conclusion of “The Tower,” death—that of others as well as one’s own—can thus be met with defiance. But what about Beckett? The title *...but the clouds...*, removed from its context in the lines above, takes on an ambiguous resonance. For one thing, the “but” in Yeats’s line means “only”: death, that is to say, is no more substantial and permanent than the clouds in the sky. Beckett’s “but,” on the other hand, sounds like a disclaimer. Yes, his words seem to say, it’s all very well to accept the reality of death. But the clouds....

Those Unseeing Eyes

The particular tonality of *...but the clouds...* can be traced back to the famous scene in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), when the taped voice of the monologist's former self recalls a decisive love scene of his youth:

—upper lake, with the punt, bathed off the bank, then pushed out into the stream and drifted. She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed. Sun blazing down, bit of a breeze, water nice and lively. I noticed a scratch on her thigh and asked her how she came by it. Picking gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [*Pause.*] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[*Pause.*]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [*Pause. Low.*] Let me in. [*Pause.*] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stern! [*Pause.*] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up-and-down, and from side to side.⁸

Krapp has already listened to the last two sentences of the monologue and abruptly cut them off. And the gist of the story, beginning with the word “gooseberries,” will be replayed, after further interruption by the narrator at the end of the play. It is, evidently, the scene of the crime to which the 69-year old Krapp returns obsessively to understand why his youthful “chance of happiness” never materialized.

What makes this passage so painful is its representation of young Krapp-Beckett as having taken the initiative. It is he who declares to the girl that their love is “hopeless,” a judgment to which she passively assents “without opening her eyes.” Then he demands a response—“I asked her to look at me”—but her eyes looking into the sun are “just slits.” Exasperated, the lover so to speak forces “entry”: “I bent over to get [her eyes] in the shadow and they opened.... Let me in.” As in “The Tower,” the “sun’s under eclipse,” but here there is no antithetical moonlight, only the movement of the punt rocking the silent lovers.

“Those whose past passions are unatoned,” wrote Yeats, “seldom love living man or woman but those loved long ago.” It is such unatoned passion, the refusal to “plunge into the labyrinth of another’s being,” that haunts Krapp as well as his creator. In playing back the “spools” recorded during the past thirty years, the love scene—indeed any love scene—cannot recur. Only its memory

FULCRUM

recurs—over and over again: in Yeatsian terms, the ghost is “sent / out naked on the roads ... and stricken / By the injustice of the skies for punishment.” And thus the clouds, far from dissolving in the night sky, darken.

In the later plays, the failure *to love* (and hence *be loved*) becomes a major chord, repeatedly involving parodic variations on elegiac motifs in earlier poetry, especially Yeats's. The radio play *Words and Music* (1962) is an interesting example. In this enigmatic verbal/musical composition,⁹ Croak's first words, having invoked his “servants” Joe (Words) and Bob (Music) to “be friends!”, are “I am late, forgive,” followed after a pause by the abrupt invocation, “The face,” followed by another pause and then “On the stairs.” And, a moment later, “In the tower” (Grove 334). Croak commands Words to extemporize on “love,” and the latter, who has already spoken his set piece, which sarcastically substitutes “sloth” for love,” launches into his absurd “Love is of all passions the most powerful” speech. But it is only when he mentions “Love of woman” that Croak becomes agitated: he soon interrupts both Words's absurdities (“Is love the word?... Is soul the word? Do we mean love, when we say love? ... Soul, when we say soul?”) and Music's loud chords, to introduce a second set theme, “Age.” In response, Words, echoed by Music, tries to sing or at least intone the poem we hear, first one line at a time, and then, with Music taking the lead, as a whole—an unrhymed fourteen-line lyric written in Yeatsian trimeters:

Age is when to a man
Huddled o'er the ingle
Shivering for the hag
To put the pan in the bed
And bring the toddy
She comes in the ashes
Who loved could not be won
Or won not loved
Or some other trouble
Comes in the ashes
Like in that old light
The face in the ashes
That old starlight
On the earth again. (Grove 337)

The language of this song is designedly equivocal, shifting as it does from “poetic” diction (“Age is but to a man / Huddled o'er the ingle”) to matter-of-fact description (“To put the pan in the bed / And bring the

toddy”). This tonal shift sets the stage for Beckett’s ironic deflation of Yeats’s “woman lost” motif: “She comes in the ashes / Who loved could not be won / Or won not loved / Or some other trouble.” Words’s lyric seems to be mocking Croak’s obsession, for he goes on to refer to “The face in the ashes / That old starlight / On the earth again.” Starlight, to refer back to Yeats, signifies the dark of the moon and hence absence. The cue is too much for Croak who now murmurs despairingly:

The face. [*Pause.*] The face. [*Pause.*] The face. [*Pause.*] The face.

Music makes a “sentimental” flourish, to which Croak can only respond by repeating the words yet again: “The face.”

The listener cannot know, of course, whose face it is that tortures Croak. Indeed, Words now jumps into the opening created by Croak, taunting the master’s “Image of a Past Life”:

—flare of the black disordered hair as though spread wide on water, the brows knitted in a groove suggesting pain but simple concentration more likely all things considered on some consummate inner process, the eyes of course closed in keeping with this, the lashes ... [*Pause.*] ... the nose ... [*Pause.*] ... nothing, a little pinched perhaps, the lips... (Grove 338)

These realistic details, far from puncturing the bubble of Croak’s dream, ironically have the opposite effect: in an “anguished” cry, his voice intones the single word “Lily,” evidently the name of the “woman lost.” Having exposed his weakness, Croak is now prey to the torment inflicted by his own “words” and “music”: he must listen to Music’s “*irresistible burst of spreading and subsiding*” and Words’s lewd reference to “the great white rise and fall of the breasts, spreading as they mount and then subsiding to their natural ... aperture” (Grove 339).

It is too much for Croak: after the single cry “No!” we never hear his voice again. Indeed, the idealism of the “Tower” poet and, to an extent, of Krapp now gives way to the clinical appraisal offered by Words:

—the brows uncloud, the lips part and the eyes ... [*Pause.*] ... the brows uncloud, the nostrils dilate, the lips part and the eyes ... [*Reverently.*] ... open. [*Pause.*] Then down a little way ... [*Pause. Change to poetic tone. Low.*].

Here the eyes that haunted Krapp, those slits he could not penetrate until

FULCRUM

his body blocked out the sun, are described as they would appear during the sex act, the lips parting, the nostrils dilating. And the song that follows, interrupted by Music's variation and then sung all at once, turns Croak's orchestral commands inside out in a sequence of trimeters and dimeters that both echoes and yet burlesques Yeats's "Now shall I make my soul" passage:

Then down a little way
Through the trash
Towards where
All dark no begging
No giving no words
No sense no need
Through the scum
Down a little way
To where one glimpse
Of that wellhead (Grove 340)

The sentence is left in suspension as if even "one glimpse / Of that wellhead" is too overwhelming for all the parties concerned. "My Lord," Words cries out, evidently in response to Croak's collapse or withdrawal, and we hear the sound of a club falling and slippers shuffling away. Only Music can now fill the silence.

In "Words and Music," the imagination continues to dwell on "a woman lost," but, unlike Krapp, who plays Box 3, Spool 5 again and again, Croak cannot control his own "words" and "music"—words and music that only serve to underscore his most painful memory, "The face," a memory which is submitted to mercilessly vivid dissection. Indeed, the two lyric poems embedded in the dialogue are equivocal: on the one hand, they pay homage to the trimeters of Yeats's "Friends," "Easter 1916," and "The Tower, III"; on the other, they announce that Yeats's epic image—a "woman Homer sung"—has become, in the Beckettian universe of the late twentieth-century, a figure of mock-heroic proportions, no more than the subject of a contest between Words and Music, which the latter wins.

In the minimalist plays of the 1970s, even such repartee gives way to speech fragment and gesture. Thus, in the television play *...but the clouds...*, the protagonist M (man) is first viewed by the camera from behind, "sitting on invisible stool bowed over invisible table," in priestly "light grey robe and skullcap" (Grove 444). As the drama unfolds, M₁ (the self of memory) is seen on screen, emerging from or retreating into his "sanctuary" (North) in robe and skullcap or crossing from East (left) to West (right) and back

again, wearing “Hat and dark greatcoat” as if fated forever to walk the dark roads outside the circle of light, which is his domain.

The very first words we hear Voice (M’s voice) speak are, “When I thought of her it was always night.” But here there is no “real” incident, like the idyll in the punt in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, to be relived, nor are there allusions to sexual union as in *Words and Music*. All Voice can do is try to make the image of the nameless woman—a woman he may or may not have once known—reappear. But what are the facts? “Let us now,” says Voice, after a series of dissolves in which M crosses and recrosses the set, either in hat and greatcoat, or in robe and skullcap, “distinguish three cases. One: she appeared and— ... In the same breath was gone.... Two: she appeared and— ... Lingered.... With those unseeing eyes I so begged when alive to look at me.... Three: she appeared and— ... After a moment—”; at this point he voicelessly intones the words “... clouds ... but the clouds ... of the sky” (Grove 447–48). Finally, “There was of course a fourth case, or case nought, as I pleased to call it, by far the commonest,” when she did not appear at all and the protagonist, the voice rationalizes, was left “bus[y]ing himself] with something else, more ... rewarding, such as ... such as ... cube roots, for example, or with nothing” (Grove 448). After these words, there is only one more shot, a five-second shot at that, of the woman’s face with its unseeing eyes, and she is gone, leaving Voice to recite, “... but the clouds of the sky ... when the horizon fades ... or a bird’s sleepy cry ... among the deepening shades ...” followed by dissolve, fade out, and darkness (Grove 449). The whole text, including stage directions and a geometric diagram of the set and camera angle, has less than six pages.

“Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or a woman lost?” The concept of loss is not quite meaningful here because it is not clear that “the face” (or rather, as Beckett’s stage directions tell us, the reduction of face to eyes and mouth) was ever a reality. To understand Beckett’s twist on the Yeatsian theme in this instance, we should note—and this is an aspect of the play that has been ignored—that Voice’s locutions are repeatedly marked by their Yeatsian phrasing. “For had she never once appeared,” for example, echoes Yeats’s predilection for the negative subjective, as in “Words”:

That had she done so who can say
 What would have shaken from the sieve?
 I might have thrown poor words away
 And been content to live. (Yeats 256)

FULCRUM

But Beckett's most telling verbal echo is found in Voice's first speech, punctuated by images of M1 crossing the set: "I came in ... came in Came in having walked the roads since break of day" (Grove 446), a fragment repeated with variations a second time—"Until the time came, with break of day, to issue forth again, shed robe and skull, resume my hat and greatcoat, and issue forth again, to walk the roads" (Grove 447)—and finally, a third: "issue forth again, to walk the roads. The back roads" (Grove 449).

These passages evoke not only Yeats's "The Cold Heaven," where the ghost is "sent / Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken / By the injustice of the skies for punishment," but also the 1920 poem "Towards Break of Day" (Yeats 398), which begins

Was it the double of my dream
The woman that by me lay
Dreamed or did we halve a dream
Under the first cold gleam of day?

This poem, from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, is one of a sequence of painful love poems, written shortly after Yeats's marriage, in which the "I" cannot escape "An Image from a Past Life," and the "woman that by me lay" (evidently Yeats's wife) knows it. In the third stanza of "Towards Break of Day," the poet exclaims, "I grew wild. Even accusing Heaven because / It had set down among its law: / Nothing that we love over-much / Is ponderable to our touch" (Yeats 399). Meanwhile, "she that beside me lay" (stanza 4) "watched in bitterer sleep / The marvelous stag of Arthur"—the beautiful white stag of Arthurian legend that so fully distracted the king, he forgot his sweetheart.

In Yeats's case, the malaise recorded in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* gives way in "The Tower" to the casting out of remorse and hence the ability to "dwell" on the "woman lost" with less pain than pleasure. But in Beckett's version of "The Tower" this doesn't happen. The eyes in *Krapp's Last Tape* that were mere slits blinded by the sun but opened long enough in the shadows to have the poet say "Let me in," are now vacant. Even if the woman may have, briefly, "lingered," it was "With those unseeing eyes I so begged when alive to look at me." But she never does look at him, never even speaks, although her mouth inaudibly forms the words "... clouds ... but the clouds of the sky." Thus, Yeats's clouds, far from dissolving so as to admit clear passage to the "translunar paradise" beyond, are here seen as just what they are, clouds that dissolve into a blank sky, a

fitting counterpart to the “bird’s sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades.” Indeed, the film’s movement is, in Wallace Stevens’s words, “downward to darkness on extended wings.”

Yet if Beckett cannot share the will toward transcendence of this and related Yeats poems, why is he so taken with Yeats’s notion of *sweetness*, flowing “from my heart’s root” (“Friends”) or “into the breast” (“Dialogue of Self and Soul”)—a sweetness so profound that, in Yeatsian terms, “Everything we look upon is blest”? My own hunch is that Beckett repeated such lines in “amazement,” because he saw in them a terrible poignancy lost on those who take Yeats’s declaration of his “faith” at face value. The key passage, in this regard, is one Beckett does not cite, the passage (lines 173–80) immediately preceding “Now shall I make my soul”:

I leave both faith and pride
 To young upstanding men
 Climbing the mountain-side,
 That under bursting dawn
 They may drop a fly;
 Being of that metal made,
 Till it was broken by
 This sedentary trade. (Yeats 416)

We are to believe here that Yeats was one of those lusty mountaineers or fishermen, those “primary men,” in Yeats’s scheme, whose physical prowess was “broken” only by that “sedentary trade”—writing poetry. “Being of that metal made”? The pose is so grandiose that the reader can’t help smiling at the extent of “I”’s self-deception. As a rhetorical gesture, Beckett implies, it is remarkable. But even more remarkable, perhaps, is to take Yeats’s words, and cut them off from their overt source. “Now shall I make my soul?” Better to face the music, to begin with that “but” and see what the clouds are actually up to. And the irony is that “death,” in this case, is not the actual, physical death Yeats’s poems hold so threatening, but the death of the spirit that pervades everyday life. The love that is “unatoned”—in Beckett’s case, perhaps for his cousin Peggy Sinclair, who died of tuberculosis when she was only twenty-two—haunts the poet’s present, even as the daily round continues—walking the roads in dark hat and greatcoat, sitting by the fireside in robe and skullcap, waiting for those “unseeing eyes” to give us a glance. “Make sense who may,” as Voice puts it in the late play *What Where* (Grove 504). But if not sense, then surely “make poetry” out of it. And that, in Beckett’s answer to Yeats’s “heroic cry,” is also a way of casting out remorse.

FULCRUM

Notes

1 Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett I* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 62.

2 For a good summary of Beckett's changing response to Yeats, see S. E. Gontarski's entry on W. B. Yeats in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 2004), 657–58; and cf. the entry on Jack B. Yeats, 655–57.

3 See Atik, 68–69, 124; cf. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 658.

4 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 479. All further references to Yeats's poetry are to this edition.

5 For a fuller treatment of the Yeats-Gonne quarrel, see Perloff, "Between Hatred and Desire: Sexuality and Subterfuge in 'A Prayer for my Daughter,'" in *Essays in Memory of Richard Ellmann*, ed. Ron Schuchard, in *Yeats Annual 7*, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1990), 29–50.

6 It is interesting to note that "The Cold Heaven" immediately follows "Friends" in *Responsibilities* (1914): in "Friends," the poet, having praised the supportive role in his life of two other women (evidently Lady Gregory and Olivia Shakespear), poses the question, "And what of her that took / All till my youth was gone / With scarce a pitying look? / How could I praise that one?" And it is then that he is able to forgive and "So great a sweetness flows / I shake from head to foot."

7 See Perloff, "'The Tradition of myself': The Autobiographical Mode of Yeats," *Journal of Modern Literature*: Special Yeats Number, 4, no. 3 (Feb. 1975), 529–73.

8 Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Grove Centenary Edition: III Dramatic Works* (New York: Grove, 2006), 207. All further references to the plays are to this edition.

9 See Perloff, "'The Silence that is not Silence': Acoustic Art in Beckett's Radio Plays," *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).