

Stoic Nihilism

& The Beauty of Oblivion

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Happy Days

BAM, Brooklyn, New York

January 8 – February 2, 2008

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 1, February 2008

HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



Stoic Nihilism

& the Beauty of Oblivion

A Meditation on Beckett's *Happy Days*

Happy Days

BAM, Brooklyn, NY

January 8 – February 2, 2008

by Rainer J. Hanshe

“ I have little talent for happiness.
—Samuel Beckett

“ If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can
ever warm me, I know that is poetry.
—Emily Dickinson

“ . . . weak characters that have no power over themselves . . .
hate the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil
constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned:
they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

“ Remember too on every occasion which leads one to vexation
to apply this principle: not that this is a misfortune, but that to
bear it nobly is good fortune.
—Marcus Aurelius

From the extremity of his own limit, Cioran said that more than one of Beckett's pages seemed to him like “a sort of monologue after the end of some cosmic epoch.” What they generate he elaborated is the “sensation of entering into a posthumous universe, some geography dreamed by a demon released from everything, even his own malediction.” *Happy Days* could be described precisely in this manner, and Cioran may have had it in mind, but whatever survives after that end apparently continues *ad infinitum*. World without end, Winnie announces after her opening prayer. World without end. In the midst of the loss of all sense of irony, Cioran's vision of Beckett is the necessary antibiotic for curing those who suffer from the plague that is Winnie's happiness, a plague that is now at rule and that has infected New York. 'Tis one thing if Winnie be as blind to her predicament as she is ignorant of what she quotes, 'tis another if the sight of those observing her be occluded. What to say of who directs and who incarnates her? Have they all 'seen enough' not to be inconvenienced by their blindness? Or have they grown so inured to nihilism and demoniacal topography that they find 'wonderful' even an infernal event? Or is there a refusal to countenance the event altogether?

Whether Beckett was released from malediction as a writer is arguable, and while some of the long standing interpretations of his writing are certainly ossified clichés, the abyss is there. The nihilism is incontrovertible. The dark, as Winnie the unconscious ventriloquist echoes, is eternal. For Jesus Christ sake Amen. There is no end to the black night, even in the perpetually blinding and hellish light of *Happy Days*. As comic as he sometimes makes the abyss, it still like the bell for Winnie *gouges*. Aristophanes is comic, too, but his plays sting. Whilst Beckett's characters may provoke laughter, and whilst his plays may be humorous, the laughter let us not forget resounds in a posthumous universe where acquiring hope is as difficult as cultivating fruit from its obdurate terrain. Winnie may be optimistic, but optimism in and of itself is not positive; neither is it unequivocally admirable. "Was Epicurus" not "an optimist," Nietzsche asked, "precisely because he was *afflicted*?" Even Socrates was chided for his optimism—it is unworthy of a philosopher Nietzsche thought because it is naïve. In the world of *Happy Days*, little to nothing grows and aside from Winnie and Willie a lone emmet is the only visible form of life, but it is ready to birth a host of other emmets that will crawl over and possibly within Winnie's skin. That is scant cause for optimism. Fornication aside, the following decade it appears will be the decade of cheery, light-hearted, and, to our misfortune, *palatable* Beckett. The National Theatre of Great Britain's *Happy Days*, as directed by Deborah Warner and performed by Fiona Shaw, ushers in this regrettable vogue. What happened to the trouble with being born?

Warner's and Shaw's original intention was to stage a version of *Waiting for Godot* with women playing Didi and Gogo. After supposedly receiving a life sentence of exile from the Beckett Estate for their abuse of *Footfalls*, Warner and Shaw wanted to return not only with their impudence intact, but with even more irreverence. When still alive, Beckett consistently opposed attempts to stage *Godot* with women. To Estelle Parsons' and Shelley Winters' request, Beckett's answer was resolute: "definitely NO." Recently, the castle that is Beckett received a defeat. A new dawn it seems has broken in Italy, a precedent set, perhaps, for the world. With the Pontadera Theatre's victory over the Beckett Estate, which issued a cease and desist to the theater because their performance of *Godot* featured women in the central roles, Warner and Shaw perhaps thought victory would be quick to come. After the Ponatadera's triumph, one of few victories against the Beckett Estate, the theatre company's lawyer, Maurizio Fritelli, spoke of the decision as a victory for civil liberties. "The sentence," he said, "is valuable" for it "reiterates that men and women have equal rights." Linda Ben-Zvi argued in *Women in Beckett* that "to ignore the roles of women, or of men, is to fall prey to an acceptance of the very stereotypes and limits the work reveal." Is there not a gross confusion of categories here? Fritelli's statement is simply baffling, for the matter has nothing to do with equal rights. If a man wanted to play Winnie

or the unnamed woman and voice of *Rockaby*, Beckett surely would have refused, as is easily attestable his estate now would. Ben-Zvi is also royally perplexed. In refusing to permit the alteration of the gender of his characters, there is no approval of stereotypes and no acquiescence to limits. There can be no stereotypes in Beckett's plays for they do not even contain types. In his universe, types have been obliterated. What remains is something else entirely, something like a Giacometti sculpture. There is nothing more honed. What perchance is left is the wheat of humanity. Nothing more. It is a condensation of being.

If there are limits in Beckett's plays they are not limits in the ordinary sense; as Cioran realized, Beckett "reached the *limit*," that is, he reached an extreme threshold. He begins there in fact, "at the impossible, at the exceptional, at the impasse." It is "limit-situation as point of departure, the end as advent!" It is this Cioran explained "which accounts for the feeling that that world of his, though always tottering on the verge of death, may continue indefinitely, whereas ours will soon disappear." Cioran's use of the word advent is not arbitrary; Beckett's work is a movement towards a different kind of consciousness altogether. It is the arrival of something unprecedented. Death's dreadful advent is the mark of man, and Beckett chronicles that event poetically.



"I want," he said, "to bring poetry into drama, a poetry which has been through the void and makes a new start in a new room-space. I think in new dimensions and basically am not very worried about whether I can be followed."

Poetry of the void, stressed to a threshold. There are no other limits in Beckett's work. Ben-Zvi's viewpoint is the prototypical 'postmodern' one, which in the wildest manner struggles to engineer what is a question of artistic vision into one of ethics and rights. What is at stake actually has nothing to do with either, and Beckett's work will not suffer such politically correct tyranny. Or we should not permit it to. It is architecture that is in question; architecture and nothing less substantive. Changing the gender of a character is like changing the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*. No more would it be Stravinsky's composition. This is a matter of vision, of refusing to permit the gross deformation of an artwork. It is to respect structural design, for to alter that structure is to deform the entire building; if one intends on committing such atrocities, and that's what they are, one should simply create one's own work. Why abuse the masterpieces of others? What is spoken of as creative freedom is a masquerade for ineptitude. The guise is hollow; stuffed; filled with straw. Alas! Ireland is not Rome, nor is Britain, and the Beckett Estate, admirably, is not a donkey. It knows, as Zarathustra advised, how to say NO,

which is a rare event in this permissible epoch where ‘nothing is true.’ Warner and Shaw’s request was swiftly rejected, no struggle ensued, and in its stead, to the horror of both Warner and Shaw, the Beckett Estate suggested they perform *Happy Days*. Was this not a ‘punishment’ as brutish as Winnie’s? To others, rare is the honor of performing such a consummate work. Billie Whitelaw relished the play, even with Beckett directing her with a metronome, but the stage directions made Ms. Shaw’s “blood boil.” In it would be no room for histrionics, no room for spectacle. ‘Freedom’ would be restricted. To Whitelaw, all of the elements of the play “flowed absolutely like *perpetual mobile*,” whereas Shaw found Beckett’s directions akin to “linguistic fascism.” In the end, Warner and Shaw of course settled on *Happy Days*. If Winnie could live with her predicament, they it seems, to a degree, could live with Beckett’s ‘despotism.’ It is all a matter of what one sings as one suffers, or what one chooses as an antidote to alleviate nihilism during intermission because one wishes to luxuriate in subpar antics.

If as Ben-Zvi believes there are stereotypes in Beckett’s plays, Winnie may perhaps be the prime example of one. Shaw said she was always biased against the play precisely because she felt Winnie to be “some fifties housewife,” and Warner echoed Shaw’s vision of Winnie but more critically, focusing on audience reception. “I don’t think 1950s housewives do it for us anymore. We don’t know many of them.” Yet, do that many “1950s housewives” carry handguns and quote Shakespeare, Milton, Thomas Gray, and, to name one more amongst the swarm of other ghosts in Winnie’s unconscious, Sir Robert Burton? A large number of housewives clearly can’t parrot Sir Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Alone, that is a unique feat. Whatever the case, is it not permissible for Beckett to portray such a woman’s life? If anything, the prejudice seems to lie in their minds and not Beckett’s. Since according to them Winnie is so alien to “us” she was based instead on a successful London publisher, which is who Shaw said she could relate to. “She isn’t Winnie,” Shaw confessed, “but she is who Winnie would like to be.” In locating her in “the positive, it places her in the center of a universe that is much larger than just suburban Dublin.” If suburban Dublin is Winnie’s world, must it be other? Since Elsinore is alien to most, Hamlet by the same logic should be set in SoHo. All this is highly suspect. When Bruno Ganz portrayed Hitler in *Downfall*, he didn’t make him friendlier or locate him more in “the positive” because he couldn’t relate to him. And while 1950s housewives may be something of an anomaly, if that’s what Winnie is, does Warner, to pursue her logic further, know any princes and kings? Since most of us don’t, what to do with Hamlet and Lear? They are surely more rarefied than housewives, but only a pedestrian director would be myopic enough to search for contemporary corollaries to them. That we have such pedestrian directors doesn’t validate the decision; it only confirms the mediocrity and the limits of the compass of our artists. What is the necessity to contemporize but an obsession with

one's own epoch; a tedious desire to be perpetually up to date, and a lack of interest in everything but what one can directly relate to. What of what is alien to us? What of the untimely? And what of fidelity to an artist's vision? Put lipstick on Hamlet, make him a transvestite, stage it in a disco; make the battle between the Montagues and the Capulets a battle between Ian Schrager and Donald Trump; turn Macbeth into the CEO of a high profile stock and bonds company. What such directors would give us is not and never Shakespeare, but the paucity of their own imaginations. Here the lack of mythic orientation in our culture is painfully evident. In the act of transposing the mythic or archetypal into the quotidian, or replacing such with quotidian realities, there is a contemporary echo of Euripides' desacralization of tragedy, which Nietzsche diagnosed as instigating its death. Beckett, like Shakespeare, is akin to the Promethean tragic poets, but such directors want to replace what is 'mythic' in them with the "faithful mask of reality," revealing what Nietzsche called 'the deviant nature of their tendencies.' Instead of ascending to the heights of what they engage with, they reduce what is monumental to their own circumscribed perspective, flattening it, literalizing what is figurative, making obvious what through allusion is more perpetually productive of thought. When this occurs, and it occurs all too often in this decadent era, it is only a temporary flattening, and it is under the mark of whatever fashionable director's or actor's name. The work is never truly flattened, only diluted momentarily, or within the sphere of a specific vision. For the height to which such work can rise is clear in the hands of real artists, of artists who justly deserve the nomenclature. Fellini was wise enough to call his Petronius *Fellini's Satyricon*. Is Hamlet as inept as Ethan Hawke makes him in Almereyda's modernization of the play? Encounter Smoktunovsky's Hamlet in Kozintsev's 1964 inimitable film and encounter Hamlet for what Hamlet can be and what we are persuaded Hamlet possibly is. When genius meets genius the light of the aurora borealis dawns on us, or we see the sun ascend into the sky as if for its very first time. That is awe, not imitation, and that is what Beckett demands too and what we should demand of our interpreters of Beckett.

To all of these middling directors and actors however, Beckett is constricting. If they were to perform Beethoven's 5th, they would want to change the key of the symphony 'just to hear what it would sound like.' It would be 'an interesting experiment.' At this point, experimentation is resorted to or relied on out of lack of aesthetic muscle. Of the numerous recordings that exist of Beethoven's late string quartets, Edward Beckett, who performs frequently as a flautist, noted that "every interpretation is different, one from the next, but they are all based on the same notes, tonalities, dynamic and tempo markings. We feel justified in asking the same measure of respect for Samuel Beckett's plays." For those who refuse such respect, in their desire to infect Beckett's work with novelties or alter it according to whims not in harmony with the play, what they reveal is not the limits of his work, but the limits of their own vision and of what they

become when they are confronted with boundaries. It is easy to be ‘creative’ when given every license but rarely does this result in something so singular. The true test of a creator’s abilities is in the measure against a boundary. “To ‘give style’ to one’s character,” Nietzsche says,



is a grand and a rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fashion them into an artistic plan, until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye. [. . .] In the end, when the work has been completed, it is revealed how the constraint of a single taste organized and formed everything large and small. Whether the taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!

It will be the strong and imperious natures that experience the most refined joy in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own . . . It is the reverse with weak characters that have no power over themselves, and *hate* the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned: they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve. . . Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is ever ready to avenge himself on that account: we others will be his victims, if only in having always to endure his ugly aspect. For the aspect of the ugly makes one bad and gloomy.

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The directors and actors who meet with the boundaries that Beckett demarcated in his work hardly seem to be in possession of dimensions so expansive that he truly suffocates their potentialities. With the National Gate’s production of *Happy Days*, what is revealed is precisely a weakness; the work is indicative of characters that lack power over themselves and “*hate* the constraint of style.” To Warner and Shaw, Beckett’s constraints are demeaning, and before them they become slaves, albeit rebellious ones, and we are their victims. To circumvent Beckett’s constraints, and to circumvent the abyss of Beckett’s world, *Happy Days* has been made into a comedy. The main quote on the BAM flyer, which is from the *Daily Telegraph*, is indicative of the approach to the play; the largest and boldest statement on the flyer is that the play is “wonderfully funny.” Warner’s comment that her mood after the play is “up!” and that *Happy Days* is “very, very funny”

further reinforces their attenuation of the play through ignoring the abyss in which it occurs. It also reveals their unabashed appeal to the masses and their desire to make Beckett as inviting as Neil Simon, which most of the press has blindly seconded. Aesthetic integrity is of little importance, but comfort, entertainment, and ceaseless pleasure are the ruling lords. To this promiscuous age, Beckett's aesthetic principles are not discernible for what they truly are—noble. To be an artist to most today means to be able to 'do whatever one wants'; that however is not freedom, but a mode of dissipation and decadence. Granted, there are funny moments throughout *Happy Days*, but when it is geared in its entirety to producing them and making of Winnie's optimism something inherently positive, the truly funny moments lose their effectiveness and the terrifying optimism is wholly emptied of its irony. The humor is there, but so is the darkness, and that, Mr. Watson, is elementary. There is a clear difference between heroism and obstinacy, tenaciousness and courage, nobility and dumb resistance. In Winnie's optimism there is blindness and lack of perception; a naïveté that reveals an inability or refusal to confront reality. No matter how many times she polishes her spectacles, she will never be able to see, just as she can hardly read the letters on her toothbrush. Beckett emphasizes the occlusion of Winnie's sight with real force through her oxen persistence while the blazing light in which she resides is as bright as she is blind. To leave the play happy as many say they do is to be insensate to its reality, and, in part, the problem resides in the approach to the whole production.

Originally produced in New York City and directed by Alan Schneider in 1961, Beckett's *Happy Days* has received several incarnations in New York, including the 1998 Mabou Mines production directed by Robert Woodruff and featuring Ruth Maleczek. The National Gate Theatre of Great Britain production directed by Deborah Warner premiered at the Lyttelton Theatre and played from January 18 – March 1, 2007. Recently it was at the Kennedy Center in Washington and will run from January 8 – February 2, 2008 at BAM's Harvey Theater in Brooklyn. Aside from Fiona Shaw, it features Tim Potter as an explicitly onanistic Willie, with Potter ably conveying Willie's enervated state. The sound score by Mel Mercier captured the tonality and temper of Beckett's play more than any other element in the production. The initial moment is arresting, for one feels as if one has entered what Cioran called a posthumous universe. The faint scent of dirt and smoke evoke the demoniacal topography of the play, awakening one's other senses, preparing one for its cruel reality. Yet the infernal or sublime quality Mercier's music invokes is quickly dispelled for literalness. Beckett describes the scenario of *Happy Days* as an "expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage. [. . .] Maximum of simplicity and symmetry." A low mound with gentle slopes was far from at hand, let alone maximum simplicity and symmetry, thus eliminating the tension

between the reality of the play and its landscape. In its wake, after the thin white curtain that conceals Winnie falls to the ground and is whisked away, the spectators are presented with what resembled an industrial lot broken up by an earthquake. Subtlety it was immediately clear was not to be expected for the rest of the production, and it was not.

The image at the head of this essay is indicative of Warner's general directorial approach, which, in this production, is to accentuate to the degree of obviousness, emphasizing what should be suggested, highlighting what should be alluded to, and making conscious the unconscious, or articulating what should remain implied. Whenever Winnie removed the gun from her handbag, or held it in her hands, she pointed it directly at herself for a sustained period of time, as if the mere presence of the gun didn't clearly suggest peril. Further strident gaffes occurred throughout the performance with the most reprehensible being what earlier was referred to as luxuriating in subpar antics. As Cioran observed, every time Beckett would veer towards lyricism or metaphysics, he would have "his characters erupt in hiccups or other fits," an abrupt shift employed to restrain his characters from succumbing to hope, for, to Beckett, lyricism and metaphysics are but empty modes of hope. During the intermission, Warner chose to play the theme song to a sophomoric American sitcom with the same name as the play. If Beckett deliberately short circuited any instance of lyricism or metaphysics, he certainly would find such a tenth-rate interlude ill-fitting, not to say of little taste. While Warner's use of the song may seem relatively incidental to some and this point strained, it is given particular stress because of its absolute lack of necessity. Beckett's works are especially refined and precise, like Pompeian frescoes, or a composition such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, making any such 'addition' an excrescence, thus a true disfigurement of the play. Of *Pierrot Lunaire*, Schoenberg warned that "to whatever extent the composer felt a tone-pictorial representation of the actions and feelings indicated in the text to be important, it is simply to be found in the music. Where the performer does not find such representation, *he should refrain from adding anything that the composer did not want*. In this instance, he would not be adding, but rather detracting." In bringing poetry that has been through the void into drama, a poetry born of thinking in new dimensions, Beckett's work demands to be guided by aesthetic decisions that have an equal intensity, rigor, and taste. His work is as Cioran noted "so impregnated with poetry that it is inseparable from it." Instead of taking one deeper into the play, Warner's supplement jettisoned one from it into a banal consumerist reality harshly antithetical to the setting of the play. Poetry, to say the least, was not what she evoked. *Happy Days* is a kind of *colla voce* between the habitual or ritualized movements of Winnie and the words that she utters, both sibilate and susurrate, which punctuate her gestures in the abyss. In the midst of this music of word and gesture, throughout it actually, there are

silences. Of the 118 pauses in the text, some of which are to be lengthy, few of them were evident during the performance. Silence, like nihilism, was dispensed with almost entirely. The gestures, too, have a geometric precision that adds to the architectural beauty of the play, but that sharpness was lost on Shaw, as the necessity of that sharpness was obviously lost on Warner. Instead of finding “the most refined joy in such constraint and perfection,” they disavowed accuracy for casual, imprecise gestures better suited to realistic drama. If there is an artist’s work analogous to Beckett, it is not Degas or Dix. It is Giacometti. As is well known, Giacometti designed the stage set for the 1961 production of *Waiting for Godot*, and the two artists, whose lives were predicated on an aesthetic of failure and impossibility, were close friends. In not taking the aesthetic demands of the play seriously, its austere beauty is grossly marred. What it necessitates is an actor with the training of an Olympic athlete, such as Ryszard Cieslak, or Hijikata Tatsumi, the inventor of Butoh, if not simply any well trained Butoh performer. While Shaw lacks this precision and intense physicality, in the midst of the first act, after vacillating between mild effectiveness and some degree of greater control, her performance grew more condensed and affecting. While physically her gestures were too slipshod, aimlessly did she gesticulate, she was emotionally engaging. Shaw is adept at articulating with definite particularity Winnie’s multifarious voices. Her voice is powerful and has the elasticity and color necessary for Beckett’s heroines. Ultimately though, her characterization of Winnie alters the anatomy of the play, and the appreciation of moments of Shaw’s performance becomes an empty regard for an actor’s technique. It’s a separation into pieces of what should remain whole. Interestingly enough, Shaw was most compelling in the brief second act when she could not move. All of her energy and force was crystallized into her voice and it was mesmerizing. Yet that act was played with such literalness that the horror that is Winnie’s optimism was lost. Shaw was ferocious and vituperative, perorating like a figure from the 9th circle of hell, at times almost howling and barking like a beast. She was more like a bedraggled and homeless whore from the Bowery than the Winnie of the first act, partially because Warner decided to black out her teeth—another bizarre and unnecessary liberty that detracted from and did not enhance or illuminate the play. Yet one more peculiar alteration occurred at the most active if not climactic moment of the play, making it all the more glaring. Although he was sporting a top hat and fine dress shirt and tie, Willie wasn’t exactly “dressed to kill” as Beckett described him. Sleeves unbuttoned and askew, Willie came crawling out, jacket dragging along the ground, in dirty long underwear, eradicating once again Beckett’s unerring sense of irony. Where Beckett is subtle, they are barbarous. Further, the second act was lit as if it took place in an infernal region, suggesting nightfall, thus eliminating entirely the absurdity of the opening line, “Hail, holy light,” and the stasis of the world of the play, a world which is entirely without night and without cycles and is nothing but an incessant and eternally recurring present.

If Winnie is optimistic and 'happy,' her happiness is frightening, to some Beckett scholars more frightening even than the despair of *Endgame*, but this dread is wholly lost on these interpreters and most of the reviewers of the play, who write as if irony didn't exist and Winnie's happiness no different from Juliet's. It's true that "what Beckett offers to thought" is not necessarily "gloomy relinquishment" as Badiou argues. "The lesson of Beckett" he posits "is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage." While this is a refreshing interpretation of Beckett's work, one has to ask, what is that courage for? Utter, let alone absolute despair doesn't exist in Beckett's work. True, and I concur that Beckett was in fact "a constant and attentive servant of beauty," which Badiou persuasively argues, but it is still the beauty of oblivion. What the work is as art is distinct from what the work posits as a worldview. It is not that there is no hope in the universe, or in Beckett's *interpretation* of the universe, which is his truthful representation of the world, but that hope is not easily gained. Godot is not dead, but he has yet to ever arrive; unlikely however is his ever arriving. Optimism let us remember is for Beckett something pernicious, it is a sign as he said in *Proust* of our "smug will to live" and, unfortunately he declares, it is an incurable disease. The hope prevalent in most of the world, or in most of the opinions that pass for thought in the world, is the empty and mawkish hope of the herd, which bears down upon those who are devoid of cheery optimism, for not to be anesthetically merry is to be suspect if not very near felonious. There is something clearly absurd in Winnie's optimism and happiness, a myopia that is made terrifyingly clear through her inability to recognize the utter meaninglessness of her existence. It is a "blessing" to her that "nothing grows" and it is wonderful that "one can do nothing," save perhaps adapt, which is also "wonderful!" But there are things that we shouldn't adapt to and in adapting to them our stupidity and our weakness is frightfully apparent. This is the dumb optimism of America, which must be perpetually happy or to use a vacuous and irritating idiom common for some time and still in use today: "It's all good." Is it? Even in Malebolge? To any awakened creature, the tragic reality is different. But to Winnie and those of her faction it is 'all good,' and happily they chatter away in the dark eternal night. The gauntlet nonetheless remains and the pessimist is stronger for in recognizing that truth, tragic knowledge is gained.

The literature that exists—one cannot say lives—in Winnie is dead to her, too. The use of her parasol, the brushing of her teeth, the combing of her hair, the application of her lipstick, the rummaging through her bag: all are equally useful means for 'getting through the day' no different from her parroting of literature. When the day comes when words fail, for "there are times when even they fail," she will simply "brush and comb the hair" in order to sustain herself. Winnie is of the generation of women who attended 'finishing' school in order to cultivate themselves and refine their manners. With them, silent or awkward moments are not to occur, which is to say, *the anxiety of existence*

is to be continuously circumvented and annulled. Winnie and her kind have been trained to be perpetually gracious and to always have something to say. That is 'the old style' and while to a degree it is charming, it is also facetious and hollow. When she quotes, she quotes as if from an anthology, and what she utters are precisely that—quotes. It is not as if she has read books, and here we are closing in on the heart of the matter, if not one of the very atoms of the play. Generally, she prefaces every utterance of a quote with the statement "What is that wonderful line?" But she also 'quotes' literature without even knowing it, or rather words invade her daily patter, erupting from her unconscious like sharp prods.

“

I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, *until they find me, until they say me*, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, *perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story*, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on. I can't go on, I'll go on.

—Beckett, *The Unnamable*

To quote is to remember the literature that lives in one, not to be said. Winnie however never refers to any specific writer, play, or poem except when quoting Browning. Despite their bleakness, and all of the lines that are part of Winnie's monologue, as Brennan observed, are from literature "that is concerned with confronting death or with despair at the limited amount of time we have on earth," they are all 'wonderful.' In this, the utter superficiality of her relation to them is clear, as well as her blindness of her condition or her obstinate refusal to acknowledge it. She knows not of what she speaks and has no significant bond to the texts that exist in her.

“

I say confusedly what comes uppermost;
But there are times when patience proves at fault,
As now: this morning's strange encounter - you
Besides me once again.

—Browning, "Paracelsus"

Clearly, patience is definitely a fault in Winnie's case; it is useless and futile,

like Sisyphus forcing his rock continually up the hill. That, one may say, is his fate, but if such is one's fate, when is continuing to live an abomination of life itself and our inability to bravely end our lives a curse upon existence? There is never any instant, or rare is it that Winnie responds emotionally to the texts she quotes or which ascend into her memory. What invades her does not awaken her as what invaded Wordsworth as he recorded in *The Prelude*. The visitations of thought provoked in him further thought and reflection whereas Winnie doesn't think or reflect. Like an automaton, she operates because the gears drive her to. "Things have a life" she says, and they don't need her. In Winnie then is there not our inability to end things when we should, the stupidity of our clinging to life when life is barely present? Of our adapting to what we should fiercely resist? In *Happy Days*, it is a posthumous universe that we are in and Beckett let us not forget began writing his dramatic works just after World War II. It seems wholly forgotten by Warner, Shaw, and many critics that Winnie's life is bleak, absurd, and senseless, and that it endlessly recurs, which intensifies the bleakness to as extreme a degree as possible. Optimism, perhaps, but in not facing senselessness is real cowardice. It is the idiocy of Pangloss who before the grossest atrocities still declares that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Is that not America's ailment? Is not Beckett critiquing precisely such blind optimism through Winnie, who chews literature like a cow but never digests it? She uses quotes like Hamm uses painkillers, staving off suffering to remain insensate. Woe, woe is her, but blasted like Ophelia with ecstasy she is not; because she never truly encompasses it, it is only an empty woe that she cants, sounding off like a jukebox at the mercy of the mechanics of her body, which she is not aligned with. There are instances when she reveals insight into her condition, but they are exceedingly brief and she hastily dispels them, busying herself with one of her empty activities to stave off the reckoning. *Happy Days* is also one might say about, in a sense, the death of literature, or about the disembowelment and abuse of it. To imbibe literature as Winnie does is to be lost to it, to be insensate to expressiveness, to formal geometric beauty, to what words evoke and express. It is to eviscerate literature of its force through empty repetition, through fragmented connections to it instead of intimate involvement. If one knows only shards of *Hamlet*, what real force can the words actually have, divorced from their context? They lose their weight, they lose their sense, thus they lose in effect *their gravity* and that is meant almost literally. Out of the structure of their cosmos, the world of the book in which they exist, they float in the air and are cast about like seeds in the wind. Books however are not for idling through; that is to disgrace them. "It is not at all easy to understand the blood of another," says Zarathustra. "I hate all those readers who are idlers."

Is not Winnie one of these idling readers, as many of her interpreters are? Winnie's entrapment in the earth is sometimes read as a punishment, which raises the question as to what precisely may have caused it, with her deeper

enclosure in the earth in the second act intensifying the ‘punishment’ even more. What, some have questioned, has occurred in the first act to warrant, if anything, the intensification of Winnie’s ‘punishment’? In the second act, Winnie’s ability to recall quotes, or for quotes to arise in her mind, is considerably lessened. What may be at work here is that, in the first act, they were forced out by her unconscious to give her insight into her condition, yet she couldn’t make use of them. “Something says, stop talking now,” she observes, but she never can cease talking to imbibe what arises in her mind. Since she gains no lasting insight into her state, words do not come to her as often as they did in the first act. It is not punishment, that is too literal a reading of the dramatic event, but a *deeper collapse into obscurity*, or immobility, and she is very nearly buried up to her mouth. What it seems this may be symbolic of is a lack of awareness. To be devoid of insight or to lack perception of one’s condition is to be paralyzed. It is a rigidity born of ignorance, thus it is senseless to think of Winnie as a kind of earth figure, as some regard her. There is nothing fertile about Winnie; she is not a generative force. Demeter she is not. She is a degenerative force and the earth is swallowing her. She is indicative perhaps of our inability to make sense of our selves and the world because of our inability to make sense of literature.



In the end, no one can “hear” more out of things, books included, than he already knows. Whatever one has no access to through experience one has no ears for.

—Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

A lack of an intimate, personal engagement with literature yields nothing but a superficial relation to it such as Winnie’s, which ends in an empty parroting of words instead of an excoriating insight. In place of reading entire texts, Winnie has read but quotes in anthologies, pithy lines from quotation books to ‘pepper’ her discourse with ‘wonderful’ statements whose meaning she knows not.



That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics, to help one through the day.

—Beckett, *Happy Days*

Literature is simply something which facilitates passage through a day, like combing one’s hair, brushing one’s teeth, gazing at oneself in the mirror, or gingerly fingering a gun. It is merely a restorative to keep her happy and

optimistic, no different from the medicine she consumes in the first act. What is to come?

It is oft imagined that Winnie will sing her song as she sinks slowly into the earth, but this might not be her fate. It is a trajectory that the play logically moves towards, but the song is a crucial dramatic event, perhaps the most decisive moment in the play. It is the instant in time, and the only one in the play, when the discord between the mind and the body is overcome. Song is the one thing that is not under the dominion of habit for Beckett, and habit for him is purely negative. There is no distinction between positive and negative habits for Beckett.

“

Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals . . . The Gideans advocate a habit of living-and look for an epithet. A nonsensical bastard phrase. They imply a hierarchy of habits, as though it were valid to speak of good and bad habits. An automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence has as little moral significance as the casting of a clout when May is or is not out; and the exhortation to cultivate a habit as little sense as an exhortation to cultivate a coryza.
—Beckett, *Proust*

Song though is the one true spontaneous event; it triumphs over habit. “It must” as Winnie says “come from the heart,” “pour out from the inmost, like a thrush.” “One cannot sing” she later says, “just like that. It bubbles up, for some unknown reason.”

“

Imagination—lifting up itself
Before the eye and the progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapor, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me! I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through;
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
“I recognize thy glory.” In such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings of
Awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shown to us
The invisible world, does greatness make abode,

There harbors whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude, and only there—
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
—Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805)

Music for Beckett, as for his philosophical mentor Schopenhauer, exists above all arts. It is not that “music is the Idea itself” as Beckett thought though, but that “it passes over the Ideas,” as Schopenhauer actually said. The important difference between it and the other arts according to Schopenhauer is that it is not “a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas.” In *Happy Days*, song is the unexpected gift, the gift that Winnie searches for in Willie in the first act, and which she longs for in herself, and which she has been hoping for all along. Suddenly, at the very end of the play, Winnie is able to break into song, or rather song erupts out of her like a shoot spontaneously breaking forth from the ground. In this, the body and the mind finally coalesce. It is a rare moment of unification, and she and Willie gaze at one another in silence after it occurs. It is the awakening of perception, the opening of man; the shattering of what Blake called the ‘narrow chinks of our caverns.’ Here perhaps is the play’s actual optimism. It is not in Winnie’s blind happiness, it is not in what all of the critics believe it is, but it is in this final extraordinary moment. What does not or has not been able to happen or occur throughout the entire play finally happens. What possibly follows after the play ends, to articulate the suggestions it yields: the suicide of Willie, murder of Winnie, combined murder/suicide, the kiss of tenderness, Win’s total burial, the repetition of the first act (all magically appears as at the start of the day as Winnie informs us), or, Win’s release from the ground after the song, a signal more hopeful than any other in Beckett’s work, though it could and more than likely is merely a fleeting instant, a small triumph and brief overcoming that will soon or eventually end as nothing persists or is sustained forever—we must continually achieve things as we must continually become who we are. After, a day or so of peace if not real joy and communication between Winnie and Willie may occur only for them to return to the heap of days and the infernal burial. Twenty to thirty years of habit cannot be broken so easily; such conditioned responses are granitic. To free oneself of them is as difficult as an addict’s attempt at overcoming or breaking long developed and deeply ingrained behavior, an internal structure, like a petrified foundation, that takes years to reconfigure. Whereas to destroy such a foundation may not take as long as to build one, after the destruction, a new edifice must be constructed. Patience is its only captain, and courage, but those are not such easily sustainable forces. We are obstinate more in our futility than in

our ability to engender real transformations, which are exceedingly difficult to achieve, for rare is it we have the measure, exactitude, and courage to make such lasting transformations. Cioran compared Beckett to what is said of Buddhist adepts seeking illumination, which is that they “must be as relentless as ‘a mouse gnawing on a coffin.’ Every authentic writer makes a similar effort. He is a destroyer who adds to existence—who enriches by undermining it.” In undermining existence, Beckett returns it to us in its crystalline beauty, shorn of its false hope, declaring as Badiou noted “what we must disregard in order to face up to what may be of worth.” That is the beauty of oblivion, which we must tirelessly sculpt and shape, guided by the strength of a positive pessimism. It is that alone which is capable of bearing tragic wisdom, of truthfully confronting the abyss. Only then can we nobly bear what vexes us with any degree of honesty.