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Stages of identity: from *Krapp's last tape* to *Play*

Beckett's plays of the 1970s and 1980s form a well-defined grouping: we can refer to them as 'the late plays' with confidence. The pairing of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* has generally proved a helpful critical move, even if these, the 'longer plays', cannot sensibly be referred to as a period grouping (they are hardly 'early'). But what of the major stage plays which come between these groupings: *Krapp's last tape* (1958), *Happy days* (1961) and *Play* (1963)? Are there critical rather than merely chronological reasons for regarding them as forming a micro-sequence? Is it helpful to group them together?

We can begin to answer these questions by observing the centrality to all three plays of monologue. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* both contain monologues; but *Krapp's last tape*, *Happy days* and *Play*, different as they are, are all *essentially* monological. Even though none of the three consists entirely of a single voice speaking, the radical treatment in all of them of the isolated consciousness invites definition in terms of monologue. There is an interesting complication, however: monologue in Beckett tends, paradoxically, to yield more voices than one. Hamm in *Endgame* offers a model of the process: 'babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark' (E, 45). Monologue is never single: Krapp has his tape recorder to multiply voices, Winnie her quotations and 'voices', and the inquisitor-light of *Play* interlaces no less than three monologues into a single brutal relay. If as a sequence these three plays make monologue central, they also render it problematic. Far from revealing and confirming individual identity, as we might expect the mode to do, monologue in these plays tends to destabilize and disperse it.

The process is readily recognizable in the earlier plays. Both Pozzo, in *Godot*, and his successor Hamm have monologues. Pozzo's is a speech about the twilight (WFG, 37–8), and Hamm's his 'chronicle'-story about the peasant who came crawling to him (E, 35–7). Each speech is developed in a

comically self-reflexive manner, as a set-piece performance, and each generates different tones: Pozzo alternates between 'lyrical' and 'prosaic' tones, and Hamm between 'narrative' and 'normal' tones. In each case the act of performance itself has produced a dissociation of tones – performance-tone from commentary-tone. Both plays press the dissociation even further, for Pozzo and Hamm have servants who are required to utter: Pozzo orders Lucky's 'Think' (WFG, 42) and Hamm extracts a final speech from Clov (E, 50). In both cases the tonal dissociation has been displaced onto the relation between master and servant. It is as though the fission of tones has generated separate characters – separate, yet still vitally connected. The speaker/performer is now a servant; his master a director, a commentator and a regulator of utterance.

Glancing forward to one of the last plays, *Ohio impromptu* (1981), we find that the dualism of performer and regulator now forms the basis of the dramatic mechanism. Two figures sit at a table. Their appearances are identical – they are two yet one. They differ only in function: one is a Reader, the other a Listener. In fact Listener is rather more than a listener; by a series of knocks on the table he regulates the Reader's delivery of a 'sad tale' (CSPL, 287) from a book which lies open at its last pages. *Ohio impromptu* is only the most explicit example of the dramatic interaction which forms the basis of the dramaturgy of the late plays. The pattern of dominance and subservience which was so notable in the earlier plays has become highly ambiguous. Nevertheless both Pozzo/Lucky and Hamm/Clov are still called to mind. Above all, Listener's last pages direct us back to *Krapp's last tape*, for it is there that Beckett first isolates the 'dual monologue' and explores the regulation of utterance which is intrinsic to it.

Krapp's last tape seems to need little preamble. Critics have often emphasized the accessibility of the play. Its setting, to begin with, is unproblematic. 'Unlike other Beckett stage characters,' observes Ruby Cohn, 'Krapp is rooted in a familiar world whose every detail is realistically plausible.'¹ The situation invites dramatic treatment/an old man reviews his life, ponders the decisions he once made and assesses his present predicament. The means of review is a tape recorder, and if the setting 'in the future' (CSPL, 55) seems at first odd, we quickly realize that it is there in the interests of chronological plausibility – Krapp in 1958 could not be made to listen to tapes from a time when such recording habits not from the sixty-nine-year-old man we see before us on the stage, but from the voice of his thirty-nine-year-old self on the tape he chooses for listening. On the 'awful occasion' (CSPL, 57) of his birthday, Krapp was then, and is now, in the habit of

We learn about Krapp's recording habits not from the sixty-nine-year-old man we see before us on the stage, but from the voice of his thirty-nine-year-old self on the tape he chooses for listening. On the 'awful occasion' (CSPL, 57) of his birthday, Krapp was then, and is now, in the habit of

reviewing the past year and 'separating the grain from the husks' – that is, isolating the moments of value, of fertility and nourishment, to set against encroaching death ('when all my dust has settled'). But this process can hardly constitute a neutral record. 'I close my eyes,' says Krapp-at-thirty-nine, 'and try and *imagine* them' (my emphasis). Memory and imagination blur in the tapes, which thus annually record not a life, not even the 'grain' of a life, but the *imagining* of that grain. So when Krapp-at-sixty-nine begins his birthday task by listening to Krapp-at-thirty-nine tell how *he* began his birthday task by 'listening to an old year, ... at least ten or twelve years ago' (CSPL, 58) – in which Krapp-at-twenty-nine or twenty-seven tells ... – we are made intensely conscious of the *mediating* process which the tape recorder represents. As Andrew K. Kennedy remarks: 'It is like seeing a face endlessly reflected between two mirrors.'² Furthermore, the face can hardly recognize its own reflection. Beckett is careful, early in the play, to drive a wedge between the Krapp we see on the stage and the Krapp we hear on the tape. *We see* a short-sighted old man, who is bored, frustrated, cracked of voice and clownishly possessed of an autoerotic passion for bananas. *We hear* the 'strong [...] rather pompous' voice of one who proclaims himself physically 'sound as a bell' and intellectually at the 'crest of the wave – or thereabouts' (CSPL, 57). The two Krapps share a weakness for drink and bananas, and an ability to laugh at the aspirations of an even younger Krapp, though rather in the way that two entirely different persons might share something. The situation is both comic and strange, the result of the confrontation not simply of an arid present with a rich past, but of conflicting formations of the self emerging from a series of such formations.

Krapp, then, is inevitably split. His practice of recording commits him to that state. But then he is an habitual separator in every sphere. If *what* he does with the recorder is an attempt to separate the grain from the husks, *where* he does it is no less the product of separation: within his single room he has made his 'den', and within even that area is the pool of light with his table at its centre. Even the rhythm of the play's action could be said to be determined by Krapp's rage for separation. The actor Rick Cluchey describes Krapp as 'a notorious self-interrupter' and quotes Beckett, in his directorial capacity, as saying of the character: 'His whole life has been interruption.'³ Krapp constantly interrupts both himself and his taped voice. The interruptions are made in the interests of his grain-from-husks separation. He switches off in order to look up a word or to brood, to go off for a drink, or simply to wind forward or back. To get what he wants, he plays, skips, plays again, winds back and repeats: in short, he *edits*. The physical act of this process is insisted upon in the stage directions, and in Beckett's own productions of the play close attention was always paid to the gross

materiality of the recorder and the tapes – their weight, their noise, their bulk, their sheer awkwardness. These are the recalcitrant objects the editor must manipulate.

But Krapp is not only an editor. We infer from several details that he is by vocation a writer – he refers ironically to an 'opus ... magnum' (CSPL, 58) – and we may be puzzled that this is not emphasized by Beckett. Yet in a sense everything we see and hear Krapp doing is authorial: on the tape he (re)imagines his past, and on the stage he edits it into his present. It is here that *Ohio impromptu* becomes helpful, for it is as though the taped voice of Krapp-at-thirty-nine is the performer or creator, and Krapp-at-sixty-nine the listener/regulator. In both plays the text to be manipulated is fixed and the process of its delivery dual. 'Krapp's last tape' is not *only* the one we see him recording; it surely includes what he makes of the thirty-year-old tape he listens to. Old Krapp aims to regulate this 'last tape' just as Listener will regulate the last reading of the 'sad tale' in *Ohio impromptu*.

What, then, is the significance of the passages Krapp listens to on the tape? After listening to the tape's review of an even older tape, Krapp listens to the accounts of three episodes which are entered in his ledger as 'Mother at rest at last', 'Memorable equinox' and 'Farewell to love' (CSPL, 57). Not surprisingly, in view of Krapp's preoccupation with the activity of separation in the play, two of these episodes are narratives of separation. But all three are also concerned with the possibility of reunification.

The first episode, the narrative of Krapp's experience of his mother's death, hinges on an exclusion. He sits outside, on a bench by the weir, where he can see her window. Her death is signalled by the rolling down of a blind. A few moments later he gives a black rubber ball to a little white dog. This apparently trivial detail is narrated as a kind of renunciation: 'I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [Pause.] I might have kept it. [Pause.] But I gave it to the dog' (CSPL, 60). But this renunciation of something substantial (it is 'hard, solid') at the moment of his exclusion is, as Beckett points out in his production notebook,⁴ also a gesture of mingling: the black ball goes to a white dog. Other details in the episode confirm the pattern. Whilst waiting at the weirside, Krapp is rejected (an exclusion of sorts) when he makes approaches to a nursemaid. As a 'dark young beauty [...] all white and starch' (CSPL, 59, my emphases), who wheels a newly born child in 'a big black hooded perambulator, most funeral thing', she combines opposites. As a nurse, she is a surrogate mother, and when Krapp (at both thirty-nine and sixty-nine) remembers her eyes, 'Like ... [hesitates] ... chrysolite!', we relate this memory to the very next words we hear: 'the blind went down' (CSPL, 60). The window is a kind of eye, and the eye thus takes on a maternal association. With

these eyes closed against him, Krapp is excluded from a longed-for unity. As he exclaims later: 'The eyes she had! [...] Everything there, everything' (CSPL, 62).

Yet when the taped voice offers the old Krapp a euphoric experience of the necessity for a reconciliation of opposites, he rejects it absolutely. The second episode is a perfervid evocation of a 'memorable night in March' when, in a howling wind, at the end of the jetty (the scene is again at a water's edge), the younger Krapp 'saw the whole thing. The vision at last' (CSPL, 60). Old Krapp winds through the 'vision' with mounting impatience, but we are still permitted to hear, through the rhetorical whirl, images of the light and darkness, and what they represent, in poise ('equinox') and even union. Ironically, this narrative of reconciliation reveals the split between Krapp and his younger self at its widest. The exultant rhythms of the vision are now absurd to him.

It is not that the rhetoric of the vision is too much for Krapp, but that it is of the wrong kind. Winding on, he finally fixes on its rhetorical opposite: the becalmed rhythmic poise of the lake-setting for his 'Farewell to love'. He plays the episode once, breaks off to record this year's tape, and then returns to it as if by compulsion. The ledger-entry suggests a general decision, but the taped voice recounts a particular case. As they drift in a punt on a lake, in the blazing sunshine, the young Krapp and his beloved agree that it is 'hopeless' and 'no good going on' (CSPL, 61) with their relationship. In what follows, the imagery recapitulates that of the first episode with great poignancy. Again it is a scene of separation, and again Krapp strives for union at the very moment of separation. As she lies on the floor of the punt, the girl's eyes are closed against the sun. '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' (CSPL, 61). His plea is not only - perhaps not at all - physical. The opening eyes, shadowed in the sun, recall for us the mother's blinds, the nursemaid's 'chrysolite' and the 'Incomparable' eyes of an even older girlfriend mentioned on the tape. 'Bianca in Kedar Street' (CSPL, 58; herself a mingling: Bianca means white in Italian and Kedar black in Hebrew). 'The eye', Beckett told Rick Cluchey, 'is the organ of interruption between light and dark'.⁵ But by the same token it can also hold the promise of continuity, of union, as it does for Krapp, in the eyes of his women. 'Let me in' is a plea to heal separation and exclusion. The episode ends in rhythmic equipoise, balancing fluid and solid, movement and stillness (and, in the gently swinging overhead lamp of Beckett's own productions, light and shadow⁶): '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' (CSPL, 61). The moment is, perhaps, less erotic than it is maternal-filial. The ideal which is touched is a complex of the Mother, the Eye, and the reconciliation of opposites. Rather than a memory, it is an imaginative reliving.

And this is where the irony lies. For as we listen to this taped moment, what we see amounts to a near-parody of the scene. 'Lie down across her' (CSPL, 63), Krapp instructs himself as he replays the episode, and in his pool of light he bends over the tape-machine, his hand on it. 'Become as much as possible one with the machine', Beckett advised the actor Pierre Chabert.⁷ It is a poignant instruction. For the broken Krapp his machine, with its reassuring bulk and its twin revolving spools, has become a maternal-erotic substitute ('Spooooo!') (CSPL, 56) coos Krapp early in the play, with a sucking infantile relish). It enables him, subjunctively, to 'be again' (CSPL, 63) and so escape momentarily 'The sour cud and the iron stool' (CSPL, 62) and the polarization of wild fantasy and sordid functional sex, that make up his life now. Yet at the end of the play the taped voice of his younger self seems almost to be mocking Krapp. We see the old man, 'drowned in dreams and burning to be gone', and we hear the voice from thirty years before: 'Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back' (CSPL, 63).

We have considered how Krapp's urge to separate is manifested not just in his editing and regulation of the tapes but in his life-decisions: at thirty-nine, he renounced his 'chance of happiness' in order to realize the energy of his creative fire. The irony of the play's ending depends upon our feeling that his decision to renounce mattered, that it really *was* the vital moment. Yet Beckett assured both Cluchey and Chabert that 'whichever decision he might have taken, he would have failed'; 'I thought of writing a play about the situation in reverse: Mrs Krapp, the girl in the boat, would be prowling around behind him, and his failure, and his solitude would be just the same'.⁸ To believe unreservedly in the 'chance of happiness' would be to take Krapp at his own valuation. But it is precisely the sense of *mediation* established by the tapes and the recorder, the editing and the regulation, that should give us pause. We return to Krapp's 'grain' and 'husks'. The mother's death and the 'Farewell to love' were consciously *shaped* as turning-points by the younger Krapp and are accepted as such by old Krapp. The 'Memorable equinox' was likewise shaped, but that is now decisively rejected! We might 'wind' forward to *That time* (1976), and the sneer of one of the surrounding voices at the Listener: 'turning-point that was a great word with you before they dried up altogether always having turning-points

... (CSPL, 230). So is Krapp. He constructs a scenario in which individual choice matters: he has shaped his life badly, but *he* has shaped it nonetheless, and that at least is reassuring. However, the dense mediation of the tape recorder ensures that the play is shadowed by a sense that the power to shape is itself a fiction: it can never be grounded because what is being shaped by the process of editing is itself always already shaped, edited. Krapp cannot shape his experience definitively because he has no unmediated access to the past. This is the real scene of exclusion ('Let me in'). The tape recorder is a necessity for him, but it serves ultimately to confirm precisely the split in identity which it was meant to close.

This reading of *Krapp's last tape* takes us some way from our initial idea of the play as showing an old man's review of his life and decisions. However, we can now recognize a significant continuity between *Krapp* and *Happy days*: both plays are concerned with the continuous *construction* of individual identity in the face of an encroaching threat. In *Krapp* the threat is *Time*, impalpable yet ubiquitous, not ever-present only because it eats away at every presence. In *Happy days* the threat is more immediately obvious; it is made visible.

The chief character of *Happy days*, Winnie, is being progressively swallowed, sucked down, by that 'old extinguisher' (HD, 50), the earth. The scenario is the most surreal in all of Beckett's drama, not just by virtue of its stage imagery – bizarre though that is – but because of the juxtaposition, at once grotesque and poignant, of Winnie's physical situation with her verbal and gestural manners. Buried first up to her waist and then up to her neck in a low mound in the 'Blazing light' of an 'unbroken' desert plain, she strives, desperately but unflaggingly, to project herself, in appearance and speech, as a well brought-up, decent, middle-aged married woman – not necessarily a housewife, but 'normal' nonetheless: 'About fifty, well-preserved, [...] plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl necklace' (HD, 16). She is painfully aware of her physical situation, but not of its absurdity. It is her unawareness which makes her absurd; but, as Beckett told the actress Billie Whitelaw,⁹ it is also her strength. It enables her to address herself to the task of self-construction with an extraordinary grace and tenacity, and to fend off the sense of hopelessness which mounts throughout the play just as surely as she sinks into her mound.

Winnie's resources for survival are twofold: words and her bag. In fact the status and function of her words are similar to those of the objects to be found in the 'capacious black bag, shopping variety', which lies beside her on the mound. In her situation, words are not just a means of self-expression but objects available for organization and manipulation in the task of

survival. Thus they take on the status of *derived* materials. The famous words of others constitute her greatest bulwark; she is an inveterate alluder: 'That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one's classics, to help one through the day' (HD, 74). This cultural memory is hardly infallible ('What is that unforgettable line?'; HD, 64, but she trusts it more than she does her personal memory. Indeed, personal memory has often to be surrounded by notional quotation-marks, qualified in a speech-act, before she will accept it: 'I used to think ... [pause] ... I say I used to think ...' (HD, 64). Accessible only by citation, her own past consciousness assumes the removed, quasi-fictional status of Krapp's tapes. Like her allusions to the 'classics', it is real only *as* language. Yet if this move makes it available as a resource – language being what she so badly needs – it threatens simultaneously to undermine her efforts in self-construction. Her wholesale derivation of verbal material from other sources, whether the classics, her quaintly artificial 'sweet old style' (HD, 32) or her own past consciousness regarded as other, has the effect of compromising Winnie's status as the *origin* of her own discourse. So too does the plurality of her voices, manifest in the text and, as Ruby Cohn reports, made explicit by Beckett in his instructions to the actress Eva-Katharina Schultz: 'She [Winnie] was to speak in three main voices – a neutral prattle, high articulation to Willie and childlike intimacy to herself.'¹⁰ To these may be added the 'narrative' voice required for her stories.

The accumulation of these features puts us in doubt. Is Winnie dispersed among these voices? Are we indeed witnessing a character called Winnie, or the *performance* of 'Winnie' by a consciousness not fully constructed or 'centred'? Certainly what we hear and see in the theatre is a performance, but the distinguished actresses who have played the role of Winnie – among them Madeleine Renaud, Peggy Ashcroft and Billie Whitelaw – have been *playing* a performer. Winnie is, of necessity, a virtuoso of the inconsequential. She must improvise through her day, every day, with words and her bag as her only resources. Her situation harks back to *Endgame*, which is both more explicitly metatheatrical ('I'm warming up for my last soliloquy'; E, 49) and less urgently so. The sardonic play with the audience in *Endgame* ('I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy', E, 25) has given way to an eerie sense of threat: 'Strange feeling that someone is looking at me' (HD, 52–3). Hamm and Clov are both double-act and audience to one another, but in *Happy days* that complementarity has almost disappeared. Winnie has a companion, but the results of her attempts to provoke a duet are mostly hilarious failures.

The companion is of course her husband Willie. He is only partly visible behind the mound in Act I – reading his paper, tending his wound, shelter-

ing under the 'rakish angle' (HD, 24) of his boater – and completely invisible in Act II, until he emerges resplendent for the climax of the play. Winnie also provides a commentary on his other, unseen activities. He is a grotesquely comic figure, yet he is vital to Winnie's continuing effort of self-construction because he is her audience. More than that, he represents to her the very idea of audience. When she imagines even the possibility of his no longer listening she suffers what Beckett as director called 'crises of loquaciousness',¹¹ in which she gives way to a panicked gable.

So the performer has her audience; she has the materials, many of them derived, out of which she will improvise her verbal script; she has her bag-full of homely props: toothbrush, mirror, spectacles, brush, lipstick, medicine, hat, comb, nail-file, musical-box, together with one distinctly unhomely one – a revolver. Unanticipated extras are provided by Things Happening: her parasol catches fire, and she spots 'a live emmet' with its eggs. It is rather unpromising material, but she must regulate her use of it to get through the day. Her regulation is in the form of self-exhortation: she instructs herself to begin her day, to put on (and off) her hat, to sing her song, to pray her prayer. In between she makes her toilette, polishes her spectacles, files her nails, tells her stories and comments on her own delivery. She frequently counsels herself against doing something too much or too soon, against squandering or saving her resources, and even ponders the problem of regulation itself. As with Krapp, interruption is an inevitable part of regulation. Beckett told Billie Whitelaw: 'One of the clues of the play is interruption. Something begins; something else begins. She begins but doesn't carry through with it. She's constantly being interrupted or interrupting herself. She's an interrupted being.'¹² If Winnie is, as Beckett described her, an 'organized mess',¹³ we can recognize her self-interruptions as a vital part of the process of self-organization.

Winnie shares her need for regulation with Krapp – though without his degree of duality – and her metatheatricality with Hamm – though without his ironic explicitness. But her situation is defined by a condition which is apparent in neither of the earlier plays. Winnie is not just a regulator; she is herself regulated in a basic but increasingly harsh way by another metatheatrical feature: the bell which signals performance. 'It hurts like a knife', she says, 'A gouge' (HD, 70). Her 'day' is that period 'between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep' (HD, 32). The sound may not impinge upon our attention in Act I, where we hear it only at the beginning; but in the very different world of Act II, with Winnie now embedded up to her neck, her props unavailable and her words used to keep an increasingly eerie environment at bay, we hear it no less than five times. When she is awake it will not let her close her eyes, and (she tells us) when she is to sleep it will not let her

open them. Beckett had at first thought of an alarm-clock to fulfil the timing-function which he needed for Winnie, but, as S. E. Gontarski points out,¹⁴ the revision from a domestic device controlled by Winnie herself to a penetrating, impersonal theatre-device sounding from offstage was decisive. Regulation now comes to resemble a form of torture. Among Beckett's earlier stage-pieces, only the mimes – especially *Act without words II* (written in 1956), with its goad from offstage – have foreshadowed this.

Winnie defines her ontological situation with great imaginative precision in the two stories that she tells in the course of the play. She offers one of them as a memory, but both are metaphoric realizations of what Beckett referred to as her 'inextricable present'.¹⁵ The stories occupy strong, if not climactic, positions in both acts. In the first of them, Winnie tells of her encounter with the 'last human kind – to stray this way', a Mr and Mrs 'Shower' or 'Cooker', who approach 'hand in hand' with 'in the other hands bags' (their linkage figures that of Winnie and Willie). The man, a 'coarse fellow', gazes at the embedded Winnie and asks 'What does it mean? ... what's it meant to mean?' (HD, 56). The characteristic spectatorial question seems inevitable given the couple's alternative names, which are from the German *schauen*, to look, and *gucken*, to look or peep (a *Zuschauer* is a theatrical spectator). The wife's rebuff, though, is delivered with a sustained vehemence that carries Winnie's own passionate rejection of the question ('And you, she says ... what are you meant to mean?'), and climaxes in the sudden violence of 'let go of my hand and drop for God's sake ...!' (HD, 56).

Winnie's vehement act of narrative is a bid to define and control her situation, not least in terms of gender. Steven Connor puts it thus: 'As a woman, Winnie allows the dramatization of the gaze as both violation and necessity [...] Here, the female spectacle looks at itself, and watches the audience look at it.'¹⁶ Although gender is different from sexuality, the two categories are brought into relation in Act II – firstly when Winnie retells the climax of the Shower/Cooker story. This time the man's questions are prurient ('Has she anything on underneath? he says') and his partner's sudden violence issues in explicit statement: 'Drop dead!' (HD, 76). The joined hands seem to represent for Winnie the sexualized link between female spectacle and male spectator. This reprise of the Shower/Cooker climax immediately precedes the climax of Winnie's other story, previously interrupted. This one, about a little girl four or five years old called Mildred, re-imagines the play's other theatrical relationship – that between Winnie and her enemy, the bell – in terms of a grotesque sexual violation. Milly and her 'Dolly' echo Winnie and her Willie: the 'big waxen dolly' has the 'China blue eyes' and the straw hat of Willie. But this is no simple parallelism. Even though Milly shares her gender with the narrator, her name rhymes with Willie's and her

progress 'backwards on all fours' down the stairs of her home harks back to his Act I entrance into his offstage shelter-hole ('Not head first, I tell you!'; *HD*, 36). The postural specificity confirms that both are images of womb-retreat. Mildred, who 'will have memories, of the womb, before she dies' (*HD*, 70), tiptoes 'down the silent passage' (*HD*, 72) and creeps under the table to play with Dolly. The story is interrupted by 'Shower/Cooker', but its deferred climax comes, with appropriately sudden violence, in the void after Mrs Shower/Cooker's 'Drop dead!': 'Suddenly a mouse ran up her little thigh and Mildred, dropping Dolly in her fright, began to scream'. Winnie gives us the screams – which are *her* screams too. Milly's family gathers, but it is 'Too late' (*HD*, 76). The very silence over what actually happens, together with Winnie's own screams, works to indicate the experience that the story both dramatizes and displaces. When Winnie retreats in the only way she now can, the bell gouges her awake. She *must* perform. The Milly-story images the bell's sound, and all it stands for, as a sexual violation – a defloration. Together with the Shower/Cooker story, this one effects a disturbing sexualization of the medium in which Winnie constructs her being: the theatre.

There can be no resolution for Winnie. Willie finally makes his appearance, in ludicrous formal dress and with parody moustache, and as he crawls painfully up Winnie's mound (a peculiar echo of Milly and the mouse?), she sings, softly and solo, the *Merry widow* waltz duet from her musical-box: 'It's true, it's true, / You love me so!' (*HD*, 82). The revolver is 'conspicuous to her right on mound' (*HD*, 64), but we cannot know – *she* cannot know – if Willie is 'dressed to kill' (as the jokey stage direction has it; *HD*, 78) or to kiss. The bell stings her eyes open once more, 'They look at each other' (*HD*, 82), and the play ends in a unique harmonization of the pathetic and the grotesque.

An emphasis on the more grotesque elements of *Happy days* will enable us to recognize more easily the features it shares with *Play*. Indeed the continuity between these pieces is not difficult to notice. Tone, tempo and appearance are different, but in many respects the three unnamed figures in the later play (a man and two women) are in an extreme version of Winnie's situation. We register both difference and likeness. Where she undergoes gradual physical constriction, embedded up to her waist, and then up to her neck, they are held throughout set up to the neck in three 'identical grey urns', each 'neck held fast in the urn's mouth' (*CSPL*, 147). Where she articulates, with maximum variety of inflection, a text that she is free to invent moment by moment, they deliver the fixed text of a single banal story, narrated from their separate viewpoints, with toneless voices and in

rapid tempo. Where she is highly expressive in physical and facial gesture, their faces are 'impassive throughout', pointing 'undeviatingly front' and 'so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns' (*CSPL*, 147). Where she is unprotected in the blazing 'holy light' (*HD*, 76) of an 'unbroken plain and sky' ('very pompier trompe-l'œil backcloth'; *HD*, 16), they are shades in 'almost complete darkness' (*CSPL*, 147), revealed only by the 'Hellish half-light' (*CSPL*, 152) of a tormenting spot, as if in some infernal afterlife. Where her play has two acts which are very different in mood and tone, theirs has the awful duality of a *da capo*. Finally, and most importantly, where Winnie has a bell which regulates her waking and sleeping and cuts into her when she is disobedient, the urn-bound shades of *Play* have as 'unique inquisitor' a spotlight, which alone, and immediately, provokes their speech, 'swivelling at maximum speed from one face to another' (*CSPL*, 158). The metatheatrical nature of the inquisition is now not audible and periodic but visible, constant and inescapable. The light extracts speech and illuminates the speakers: without it there could be no play. But its operation is a form of torture, and the 'characters' are victims. Our status as spectators necessarily places us in collusion with the light: the inquisitor is our agent. The theatrical contract itself is illuminated by the operation of the light.

[The light prompts, interrupts (even in the middle of a word), closes; it seems to *play*.] And then it requires a repeat of the whole text. Our readings of *Krapp* and *Happy days* encourage us to recognize the light as a regulator. Throughout this sequence of plays, the process of regulation has become increasingly impersonal. Krapp is a very fallible regulator in an obviously dualistic situation; he struggles with his machine to construct an acceptable scenario for himself. Winnie exhorts herself by name, interrupts herself, worries about her self-regulation, but by the second act of the play it is becoming apparent that the significant dualism is located outside her: she is herself regulated, and the bell, cruel yet impersonal, impresses that fact upon us. The mechanical nature of the regulator, and its operational centrality within the dualistic situation, is confirmed by the light in *Play*. Regulation is now torture. In fact the direction of regulation has reversed itself: an *Krapp* man humanizes machine as he manipulates it; in *Play* machine *de-*humanizes humans as it manipulates them.

The musicality of *Play* is a measure of the light's dehumanization of the characters in the urns. All Beckett's plays invite the musical analogy in their structure, rhythm and delivery, but *Play*, as the author's stage directions and notes indicate, positively requires it – there is even a carefully scored chorus at the beginning of the text. The heads speak not just in response to the light but in the attempt to get it off themselves, hence words for them are a

defence-mechanism, a set of blocks necessary less for meaning than for their abstract function. And at the rapid tempo of the light's conducting, rhythmic patterns, both local and structural, readily emerge.

Yet if words are effectively emptied of meaning for the heads, it is not the same for the audience. In a competent production we hear the words, even at the rapid tempo, second time through if not first. And where the effect is bizarrely comic in the first run-through, any such response is drained from us in the repeat. What we hear is a text in two sections plus a chorus.¹⁷ In the second section, called by Beckett the 'Meditation', the heads speak words which attempt to make sense of their position. Although their urns touch one another, none of them is aware of the others in any way. Yet their effort is as though concerted. W₁ asks if it is 'the truth' she must tell, 'and then no more light at last [...]' So it must be something I have to say' (CSPL, 153); W₂ wonders if the light, if anyone, is listening or looking, or bothering at all; M asks 'Have I lost ... the thing you want?' (CSPL, 155) but he experiences the light as 'Mere eye. No mind' (CSPL, 157). The explanatory paradigm proposed by W₁ is attractive, for us as for them, but ultimately unsatisfactory: 'Penitence, yes, at a pinch, atonement, one was resigned, but no, that does not seem to be the point either' (CSPL, 156). So perhaps 'all is falling [...] on empty air. Nothing being asked at all' (CSPL, 154). These explicit meditations on the light's possible demands are combined with evocations of their physical experience of it. Ruby Cohn notes that in an early draft of the play Beckett refers to the light as 'soliciting'.¹⁸ The terms used by the heads are likewise sexual in their connotations: 'Or you will weary of me. Get off me' (Play, 1964 Faber edn, 15); 'some day you will tire of me [...]' 'Go away and start poking and pecking at someone else' (CSPL, 152). Winnie's sense of spectacle as sexual violation is intensified in the perceptions of the heads, for this is a gross parody of love-play: 'Weary of playing with me. Get off me. Yes' (CSPL, 157).

The metaphorical linkage between the operation of the light and sexual activity hints at the significance of the story the three heads tell, each from its own viewpoint, in what Beckett termed the 'Narration' section of the text. The story is the old one of sexual infidelity involving the eternal triangle of Man (M), Wife (W₁) and Other Woman (W₂). Man takes up with Other Woman; Wife suspects and confronts Other Woman; Man at first denies the affair then confesses; Wife forgives and crows; Man takes up again with Other Woman; Wife begins to suspect again. But then, in this version, Man mysteriously disappears ... The story as told is dense with deliberate melodramatic cliché and gestures of a physical particularity and extravagance that contrast wildly with the extreme constriction we see on the stage. For example: 'Judge then of my astoundment when one fine

morning, as I was sitting stricken in the morning room, he slunk in, fell on his knees before me, buried his face in my lap and ... confessed' (Play, 1964 Faber edn, 11). The story is located firmly in the past; it seems that after death they tell of their triangular lives. But what we notice are those moments at which the past-tense story seems to be giving a displaced description of the *present* operation of the light which calls it forth. It is, after all, a story about a man *going back* to one woman, then to another, seemingly unable to *leave* either; the wife inevitably *makes a scene* and the man pretends to *make a new start*. The uncertain end of the story dramatizes the heads' wish for the light: the man *stops coming* and disappears. The continual shifts, the metatheatrical repeat, the inexplicable wished-for end – all are there in displaced, narrativized form. The detail is closely worked, and the resulting ironies savage. Not the least of these is the alignment of the man's activity with that of the light. When W₂ says 'Give me up' (CSPL, 152) to the light in the Meditation, she is replicating W₁'s command to the man in the Narration: 'Give her up [...]' Give up that whore' (CSPL, 148). W₁'s description of the man's pursuit of the affair, 'there was no denying that he continued as ... assiduous as ever', fits the light's activity too, and his questions to his wife (W₁) reflect further on the parallel with the light's 'care' for each of its urn-bound victims: 'Have I been neglecting you? How could we be together in the way we are if there were someone else?' (CSPL, 148). M's outrage seals the connection: 'what do you take me for, a something machine?' (CSPL, 149). Ultimately, the counterpoint of narrative and dramatic mechanism is played out in the very shifts of the light:

W₁: [...] What he could have found in her when he had me –

Spot from W₁ to W₂.

W₂: When he came again we had it out. I felt like death [...] That meant he had gone back to her. Back to that!

Spot from W₂ to W₁

(CSPL, 150)

The strange double application of the pronoun 'he' invites us to echo W₂'s question: 'Who he [...] and what it?' (CSPL, 150).

The association made by the dramatic counterpoint between the operation of the light and the activity of M is on the face of it an odd one. The point about M is that he is weak and indecisive: in the story he wavers between the two women, trying to convince himself that he loves and needs them both, yet momentarily considering all women 'vermin' (CSPL, 151). The counterpoint does not, it needs to be emphasized, *identify* M with the light, but the association is still disconcerting. Surely the 'unique inquisitor' is *absolutely* distinct from its victims? The particular kind of dualism char-

acteristic of Beckett's work suggests otherwise. Consider a group of short radio plays he wrote between 1961 and 1963 – that is, between *Happy days* and *Play*: *Words and Music*, *Rough for radio I* and *II*, and *Cascando*. In each of these a detached, even brutal, master/regulator extracts a text from one or two servant/creators. By now this is recognizable territory for us. But each of these plays has a final *peripeteia* in which the detached master is revealed to be slavishly dependent upon his servants. It is the terminal relationship foreshadowed by Krapp and his recorder.

Articulation of the dramatic reversal is difficult. But it is there even in *Play*. The problem is that it is situated not at a particular point in the di-egesis, but in the changing perception of the audience: it depends upon our coming to recognize that the light *shares* the predicament of the figures it tortures. And, like M in the story, it must be felt to waver and to come back and be unable to end. The key, in any production of the play, will be the nature and effect of the variations in tempo, delivery, order and intensity of light adopted for the repeat. Beckett's printed note (CSPL, 158), added only after the initial productions, contains his suggestions. In later years he became sceptical that they could ever make the necessary impact in production.¹⁹ But if they can be made effective, then, in Beckett's own words: 'The inquirer (light) begins to emerge as no less a victim of his inquiry than they [the heads] and as needing to be free, within narrow limits, literally to act the part, i.e. to vary if only slightly his speeds and intensities' (D, 112). 'Mechanical' turns out to be not the right word for the 'unique inquisitor'; the repeat invites us to revalue the whole dramatic situation. [The light depends upon the heads, and even though they are 'Dying for dark', they fear that 'the darker the worse' (CSPL, 157); so they need the light too.] They are all there together. And we, the spectators, are there too. This is the Beckettian *anagnorisis*.

Steven Connor sees the *peripeteia* of *Play* in terms of power: 'the reversal of perceptual positions brings about a shift in the relations of appraiser and appraised. The effect is not to elide or abolish power. Rather, it is to point to power as centreless and unfixed, as consisting in exchange rather than in permanence'.²⁰ In the stage plays up to and including *Play*, the reversal of power-relations (Who requires What from Whom?) almost always involves the radical revaluation of something firmly established. After *Play*, in the late pieces, power-relations are often ill-defined, the instabilities ever-present and the reversals always imminent. This is not to say that *Play* is a turning-point ('that was a great word with you'; *That time*, CSPL, 230), but that it offers an illuminating standpoint for an overview of Beckett's plays. It enables us to look back on the territory of our own study because it develops the dualist pattern of monologue, which we identified in the earlier

plays and examined in *Krapp* and *Happy days*, to a point where its intrinsic instability is made manifest. And it points forward to a study of the late plays by prefiguring the perceptual indeterminacies that surround the same pattern there. Read or viewed as a sequence, *Krapp*, *Happy days* and *Play* chart the increasingly sharp definition of what Beckett spoke of in 1949 as the artist's 'obligation to express' (PTD, 103). It is a definition which is articulated ever more explicitly in terms of the theatrical medium – and, specifically, in terms of the relations of power which structure that medium. Krapp editing the taped voice; Winnie compelled by the bell and held by the earth; the urn-figures tortured by the light: all strive to stage an adequate presence. When we reach *Play* we find that the force which obliges its victims to speak is also obliged to them for their response, because it is itself mysteriously obliged by some *other* force. As spectators in the theatre, we take our places, if only for a moment, in this continual staging of identity as spectacle.

NOTES

- 1 Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett*, 167.
- 2 Andrew K. Kennedy, *Samuel Beckett*, 69.
- 3 Rick Cluchey and Michael Haerdter, "'Krapp's last tape": production report', in Knowlson (ed.), *Theatre workbook*, 130.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 106–7 (production with Chabert); also 137 (production with Cluchey).
- 7 Pierre Chabert, 'Samuel Beckett as director', in Knowlson (ed.), *Theatre workbook*, 105.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 128; 87.
- 9 *The Beckett Circle* 2 (Summer 1979), 4.
- 10 Ruby Cohn, *Just Play*, 253.
- 11 James Knowlson (ed.), 'Happy days': the production notebook, 177.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 13 S. E. Gontarski, *Intent of 'Undoing'*, 74.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 77–9.
- 15 Knowlson (ed.), 'Happy days': the production notebook, 150.
- 16 Steven Connor, *Repetition, theory and text*, 183–4.
- 17 See Martin Esslin, 'Samuel Beckett and the art of broadcasting', *Encounter*, 45 (September 1975), 44.
- 18 Cohn, *Back to Beckett*, 199.
- 19 See Maurice Blackman, 'The shaping of a Beckett text', 103; also see Rosemary Pountney, *Theatre of shadows*, 36.
- 20 Connor, *Repetition, theory and text*, 180.

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