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Autor(en): **Piette, Adam**

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Ill Seen Ill Said: Allusion and Cultural Memory

Adam Piette

Beckett quoted himself all his life, to the end of his life. *Company*, written in 1980, begins: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine. / To one on his back in the dark." (7) This remembers his short story, "Yellow," in *More Pricks than Kicks*, published 1934: "He could no more go back into his heart in that way than he could keep out of it altogether. So now there was nothing for it but to lie on his back in the dark, and exercise his talent." (174) Part of the sense, then, of the voice that comes to the *Company* narrator, is that it echoes the voice of Beckett's own literary past, his imaginative remains. As the narrator goes on to say in the second paragraph: "To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past." (C, 7) "Yellow" is apter, though, than the mere strength of the phrase, without context, its anapaestic rhythm, its bare Anglo-Saxon nature. "Yellow" is concerned with the question of suffering, whether to bear human pain in the privacy of the mind or the publicity of ordinary human relations, and whether to face that pain by recourse to the two extremes of laughing or weeping. The hero Belacqua's talent, though, is ambiguous: on the one hand it is in his nature to be rather good at exercising the two extremes. On the other, he has a talent that consists in intellectualizing his body and its pains, in particular utilizing to the full the literary and philosophical chapbook that is his brain. His mind is full of quotations. The problem is, these two talents do not mix — the failure of nerve, the pettiness and comic jumpiness of Belacqua's cowardice (he is merely afraid of a simple operation to remove a cyst) comes from the ways his thought patterns run furtively off-centre from the full exercising of his emotions, his capacity to laugh and weep. The literary voices from the past signal a failure of contact, a squirming away from the life of the heart.

Company takes this dilemma to its extreme, juggles with the bare bones

of Belacqua's predicament: the voice telling of the past manipulates the second person, insinuating a phantom biography, a fabricating imperative. It returns to scenes of emotional crisis, devises a past that will bond the hearer to a heartfelt memory, to a remembering, "irrevocable self." ("Yellow" 173) The voice recalls Belacqua's dreams of pain and adequate response by inverting the problem: in *Company*, the second person voice of the past is the fund of emotion in the text where the search for heart and company takes place; the third person "other" is the location of the logical, perplexed, cowardly mixed tones of exercised talent. In "Yellow," the application of the literary allusions from the past mask and delay Belacqua's engagement with the inside life of his heart. The story begins with an allusion, but allusion as hot-water bottle:

He had underlined, as quite a callow boy, a phrase in Hardy's *Tess*, won by dint of cogging in the Synod: When grief ceases to be speculative, sleep sees her opportunity. He had manipulated that sentence for many years now, emending its terms, as joy for grief, to answer his occasions, even calling upon it to bear the strain of certain applications for which he feared it had not been intended, and still it held good through it all. He waked with it now in his mind, as though it had been there all the time he slept, holding that fragile place against dreams. ("Yellow" 171)

Hardy's identification of insomnia with speculative thinking about one's emotional life is clearly crucial to the entirety of Beckett's work — the phrase has held good. But the fact it comes to Belacqua on *waking* is a little irony that points out his speculative abuse of the phrase. He manipulates it, emends it, misapplies it — all verbs of a speculative nature. As the tale goes on to show, Belacqua is a night-creature, a restless insomniac afraid of the release from his speculative mental activity, and, like the third person in *Company*, at the mercy of "Les lents souvenirs des soucis quotidiens (...) / Les traces sales des soucis, des amertumes et des inquiétudes (...) / Les traces de limaces"¹, as Péguy put it, and therefore incapable of the happy sleep of the hopeful soul. *Company's* allusion to "Yellow" turns on the relations between the past (of memory and imagination, literary and

¹ In a meditation on the relations between Hope and God's gift of sleep to his creatures. Péguy, 218

emotional) and the mind's present needs when faced with extreme suffering. *Company* finds company in the recall of Belacqua's voice; but the recall has other consequences: the revelation of the narrator's vicious split into contradictory voices, evasive, cowardly, failing, speculative, hopeless. The manipulation, emendation and misapplication of Belacqua's phrase by the third person is no empty short-circuit or intertextual machination; rather, it goes to the heart of the narrator's ontological bewilderment, his speculative fear of the heartfelt.

Beckett, then, aligns the recall of his own voice with Belacqua's "calling upon" Hardy — the distinction between personal creation remembered (personal past) and traditional allusion (cultural memory) is not so much blurred as brought into question in the self-questioning of his various voices. Belacqua made that Hardy phrase his, had it occupy his mind, protectively, intimately. The third person similarly re-makes Belacqua's phrase his, has it answer his occasions. Though these self-allusions are working in some measure as musical reprises, what I am interested in is the way they illuminate the later occasion. So, for instance, it brings *Company* into a different light to read it as an abstracting out from a tale about a hospital-experience and the fear of bodily pain — the allusion helps place Beckett's work in the perspective of a comic meditation on the sick body and the enforced solitude and restless speculation attendant upon it. The allusion acknowledges the context that surrounds the source, as well as brooding over the pragmatics of recall and the act of allusion itself.

One of the quotations that haunts Belacqua, and in many ways conditions the course of his speculation, is a reference to one of Donne's paradoxes, "That a wise Man is known by much laughing." ("Yellow" 175) Another of Donne's paradoxes concerns the reason why Venus is "multinomious," and the paradox may have interested Beckett when he began writing *Ill Seen Ill Said*, which recounts a vision/memory/figment of a dying woman, a night-creature too, who marvels at the rising and setting of Venus. In the drafts of the novel in French, Beckett gave the planet its two Latin names — Vesper and Lucifer as well as the "generic" Venus, but later reconsidered this and rewrote it as Venus alone.² The fact that the

² It seems Beckett had originally intended to use all three names at the time he wrote manuscripts 2203 and 2205 — para. 2 in 2203 reads "Vénus aube et couchant," para. 9 reads "(Lucifer, Lune, Vesper)," though there are indications in 2205 that

novel, in the hidden drama of its fragments, concerns the aftereffects and aftershocks of disastrous marriage (the woman has had her ring-finger torn off) makes plain why Beckett wanted the planet to have two sexes: Venus the harbinger of night, female principle of darkness, and Vesper, augur of day, male principle of light. Why then did he revise Vesper out of the story? One might say, for economy's sake, or to reinforce the identification of the woman with the planet (the French "elle" is the main agent of this). I will argue, though, that it was also to mask the principal source from French culture, and to ensure allusion to the principal English Romantic and Victorian sources. Part of the sealedness of Beckett's style is the deliberate discreteness of his allusions to other works than his own: the main and open-faced references are always to familiar works in the grand tradition, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, the Book of Job, and, in many cases, these strike one as dead-ended cultural bric-à-brac, like the contents of Winnie's handbag; and then there are the self-allusions that seem designed to close the words off into private space. But there is another level of allusion that, in the same way as the hardy-Belacqua-*Company* chain, opens up the work, charges it with strange yet telling contexts. It is these allusions that Beckett does his best to mask.

The open-faced reference in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is to Dante. The creature split into eye, scribe and mind, is on "centennial leave from where tears freeze," returning "to the scene of its betrayals." (27) This is a reference to Caina in the ninth circle, circle of the betrayers of kin. In the drafts, Beckett had specifically reminded himself to include these Dante references: "Préciser deux allusions à la D.C. 1. Là où gèlent les larmes 2. Poil dur front blanc" reads the notebook; and in the original manuscript, Beckett has transcribed the appropriate quotation from the *Inferno*, Canto 32, II. 46–48.³ A kind of mythology can be reconstructed from these Dantescan allusions: the eye-scribe-mind has been allowed to return to the scene of his crime of betrayal in order to check on his victim: "Watches all night in vain for the least glimmer. Returns at last to his own and avows, No one.

Vesper is the predominant name. By the time he is correcting typescript in ms 2206, Beckett has opted exclusively for Venus.

³ Ms 2203 Notebook: para. 25; ms 2205, para. 25. The paragraph is the twenty-third in the final version.

She shows herself only to her own. But she has no own. Yes yes she has one. And who has her." (13) The one person she "has" is ambiguous: there are signs that this "one" is one of the twelve figures who guard her in a clockface circle around her when she moves across the fields: "She raises her eyes and sees one. Turns away and sees another. So on." (ISIS 10), as though searching for the *right* one. And the drafts hint that the "imaginary stranger" (ISIS 12) may very well be one of the twelve: "Plusieurs indices que le corps du I pourrait être celui de l'une des 12."⁴ Capital I is Beckett's shorthand for the eye-scribe-mind. But why merely the *body*? This is another allusion to Dante, to Canto 33 where Alberigo tells Dante that "the instant any soul has turned betrayer, / like as mine did, its body is snatched from it / by a fiend, who thenceforth rules it, he alone, / Until its cycle of years are quite complete"⁵; the body is said to "winter" on earth whilst the soul is already in hell ("verna"). So the soul of the betrayer, with his devouring eye and treacherous word, is back on the scene to watch his ex-wife and the possessed body of his former self.⁶ But, from the fragmentary evidence of the tale, she is only fitfully aware of the presence of the special one of the twelve and of the invisible watching of the eye: she stares "as if shocked still by some ancient horror. Or by its continuance. Or by another." (ISIS 28–29) She goes to lay flowers on a grave to the north, the grave, presumably, of the dead partner. All in all, the deep and mysterious tragedy of the imagined woman's history is shrouded by these Dantescan possibilities: they are melodramatic; they prevent real access to the human drama; they fictionalize the relations by outwardly enveloping the tale in a mad diabolism, an overblown apocalyptic tone, a kind of treachery that involves wildly exaggerated feeling, vicious abuse of the sublime: "Hear from here the howls of laughter of the damned," (ISIS 54) the voice says,

⁴ Ms 2203 Notebook for para. 19 (18 in final version).

⁵ Dante *Inferno* Canto 33, II:129–131, Bickersteth version.

⁶ This possibility in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is backed up by a Miltonic structural reminiscence. Satan's journey from Hell to Paradise with the intent to destroy the human race as couple is a strong undercurrent to Beckett's novel. The old woman the eye preys upon may be an Eve figure, the last woman on earth, herself betrayed by the dead Adam, condemned to die out her days in a blasted parody of an earthly paradise. The viciousness of the eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is tonally in tune with Milton's Satan.

in mockery of the very idea of a possible "analogy of the heart." It is a double mockery: in the bare laughter; and in the mad Romanticism of the phrase itself which swerves the voice away from adequate feeling, adequate heartfelt words. The *h*-repetition is witness to the mock pseudo-poetic sublime, as the voice ups its register into the emptily rhetorical rhythms of a Shelleyan Dante. As the I-voice admits, the essence of his betrayal is the treacherous abuse of language with concomitant false tones and lying imaginings: "The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous word their treacheries." (ISIS 48) The allusions to Dante are treacherous in this sense: they work the voice away from acknowledgement of the vision of the woman as lived; they support the general drift of the voice to call her figment, to name her cabin "madhouse of the skull," to see her to death.⁷

The concealed allusions, unlike the open use of Dante, are there as the hidden heart of the novel, casting on *Ill Seen Ill Said* an influence as urgent and gentle as the systole and diastole of the old woman's labouring heart. An "old so dying woman"; "Such helplessness to move she cannot help"; "Rigid upright on her old chair she watches for the radiant one" at the window: this vision of the dying star-gazer, marvelling at the rise of Venus in the east, is in many ways the guiding image around which the book moves, and which inexplicably moves one most. The questions, "why Venus?", "why does she rail at the sun, source of all life," are the most mysterious of the novel and move one to the heart of its mystery. Some memory seems to be urging the woman's imagination to this fixation on the star. Beckett's imagination is itself moving around a special centre to his cultural memory, the memory of reading Colette's book of "souvenirs," *L'Etoile Vesper*.

Written during the war from her rooms in the Palais-Royal at Paris, the memoirs are vespéral in kind and intention:

Il me manque la grande planète, Vénus à l'humide éclat (...) elle trompait déjà, autrefois, l'homme aux yeux levés vers elle, qui ne reconnaissait pas, dans la Vénus du soir, le brasillant Lucifer du matin . . . Que nous disons: Vénus se lève, lorsqu'elle est près de son coucher . . . A son troisième nom,

⁷ "Not possible any longer except as figment" (30); "In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else" (20); "Nothing for it but to close the eye for good and see her. Her and the rest. Close it for good and all and see her to death." (30)

Vesper, j'associe, je suspens celui de mon propre déclin. Autrefois, elle resplendissait sur mon enfance, semblait surgir des bois de Moutiers, au milieu d'un couchant apaisé. Mon père levait le doigt, nommait: "Vesper!" et récitait des vers. (...) Tout pénètre et divague dans la chambre ouverte, tout ce que les nuits prodiguent au ciel de lumières, la lune extensible, l'aube, l'éclair et l'étoile — sauf la grande planète qui traverse invisible les ciels de Paris, effacée par le soleil et qui s'immerge presque en même temps que lui. A Vesper aux trois noms, la suivante du soleil, je dédie mes propres vêpres. (19–20)

"Vénus se lève" — "elle voit se lever Vénus" (MVMD 9); "son coucher . . . semblait surgir" — "à peine remise du coucher de Vénus vite à l'autre fenêtre voir surgir l'autre merveille" (MVMD 10); "la grande planète qui traverse invisible" — "les yeux braqués vers l'invisible planète" (MVMD 63); precise repetitions confirm the overall justness of the recall of the Colette text.⁸ Colette was handicapped by arthritis towards the end of her life and was literally helpless to move. The precise position of the old and dying woman before the night-screen of the sky,⁹ Colette's triple nature, writer, rememberer, lover, the vesperal tone of the memories, the radiant presence of Vesper-Venus-Lucifer, the association with decline and ancient memory: all these elements *Ill Seen Ill Said* takes up and remembers. Why? There are two answers, it seems to me. Firstly, the importance to Beckett of *L'Etoile Vesper* as a memory-book that is a

⁸ There are other precise similarities: Colette refers to her room as a "logis" (24); so does the original manuscript Ms 2205; the word "suivante" and Beckett's "suivi du soleil"; the presence of the three names in the early manuscript versions; and, more generally, Colette's attachment to photographs and objects (cf. ISIS 14); her love of the pastoral countryside (16); the "montre cardiaque" (127) compared to the eye's "cadran" (MVMD 57). *La Naissance du jour* is also a possible source, a night-book too that concerns Colette wondering if any man killed her in her past (30). Its description of night is Beckettian: "Le vide cristallin du ciel, le sommeil déjà conscient des bêtes, la frigide contraction qui reclus les calices, autant d'antidotes contre la passion et l'iniquité." (30–31); and the context fits the ISIS scene: "la nuit noire, la solitude, les bêtes amis, un grand cercle de champs et de mer tout autour (. . .) cette femme solitaire et droite." (229)

⁹ "l'écran de ma fenêtre." (L'EV 179)

farewell to writing. Colette felt towards the end of her life an intense weariness with the strange obligation to write, and an accompanying desire to end it all, "de mettre ici un point que je dirai final." (213) She desires "désapprendre d'écrire," (217) to write herself out ("habitude du travail et sage envie d'y mettre un terme à soi-même." (218) The book is written in the accent of last-words, so yearned for by the Beckettian voices. Further to this, there is Colette's sensitivity to the treachery of memory, its pitfalls and traps: "un de ces pièges qui confondent, enchevêtrés, le présent et l'oublié, le mensonger et le réel, et où nous attendons, passifs, de redevenir maître d'eux-mêmes et de nous . . ." (97) which rhymes so clearly with "les deux si deux jadis à présent se confondent (. . .) les deux sont mensongères. Réel et — comment mal dire le contraire? Le contrepoison." (MVMD 50)

Secondly, *L'Etoile Vesper's* context, the writing situation. The bodily position, the vesperal gaze: this tiny physicality is drawn whole into Beckett's novel. Along with it goes the outer circles of that physicality (just as "Yellow"'s hospital-situation enters into *Company* along with the little phrase). Colette was writing during the war, and she remembers the first days of the German occupation of Paris. Her husband was dragged off to the work-camp at Compiègne at dawn, and she was left alone in the Palais-Royal to suffer the agonies of "l'attente," surrounded by the "menace étrangère." (34) "La présence de l'envahisseur," (31) "le parfait et classique cauchemar de l'absence," (24) the waiting for the husband, the fear of the German: this terrible context enters *Ill Seen Ill Said*. It fills up the mystery of the mixed tones of the voice: its murderousness crossed with the gentle, agonized intonations of a lover. Beckett has crossed the wires; joining husband and evil menace together to create his returning betrayer. *Ill Seen Ill Said* is a novel that remembers marriage and fear under German Occupation.

Beckett, therefore, concentrated Vesper-Lucifer-Venus down to Venus to obscure the presence of Colette and war-memories in the situation and context. But this move opens the novel up to English Romantic and Victorian source-material. Beckett when writing was negotiating between two cultural memories, in French and English, feeling his words towards a cross-bred translated voice of an abstract culture and of a powerfully fictive memory. The English cultural memory is primarily Wordsworthian. Beckett expended a great deal of energy turning Wordsworthian pastoral on its head. The same process is at work in *Ill Seen Ill Said* with the dying pastures and the splotchy sheep. But the

situation recalls the tale of Margaret in "The Ruined Cottage," rewritten later into *The Excursion*, in particular a passage which shows how Wordsworth, too, could turn pastoral on its head. The tale of Margaret is remorseless: abandoned by her husband, her child dying, Margaret withers away from poverty and grief, wandering around the fields in torturing hope of her husband's return from the dead. *Ill Seen Ill Said* remembers the tale by recalling the details of the natural decay that accompanies the poor woman's long sorrow. Beckett has the pastures dying out as the evil spreads from the cabin, grass withering away to reveal bare chalkstone. As the woman in Wordsworth sinks into her pain, "poverty and grief / Were now come nearer to her: weeds defaced, / The hardened soil, and knots of withered grass." (Bk I, II:833–835) Like the woman in Beckett's novel, Margaret has a strange look: "evermore her eye / Was busy in the distance, shaping things / That made her heart beat quick" (II:880–883) which Beckett translates: "Riveted to some detail of the desert the eye fills with tears. Imagination at wit's end spreads its sad wings" (ISIS 17)¹⁰ – Wordsworth's Imagination is underlined as the inadequate power. Margaret's obsessive wandering, her tortured widowhood, the wintry desolation, her inward gaze ("a thinking mind / Self-occupied" [II:797–798]) are all interned in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, along with the character of the Wanderer, the narrator of the tale, whose characteristics often rhyme with the I-voice in Beckett's tale. Like the eye-scribe-mind, the Wanderer is assailed by "remembrances, thoughts, shapes, and forms" and has images fastened upon his brain (II:142–146): he "on their pictured lines / Intensely brooded, even till they acquired / The liveliness of dreams." (146–148) And like the devouring eye ("Lick chops and basta" [59]), the Wanderer is hungry: he turns his ear and eye incessantly on "all the things the moving seasons brought / To feed such an appetite." (150–152)

The Wanderer is modelled on features of Wordsworth's own self amply described in the *Prelude*. His interest in the widow is a cleaned-up version of a passage in Book VIII (Wordsworth was also fond of quoting himself):

Then, if a widow, staggering with the blow
Of her distress, was known to have made her way

¹⁰ Significantly different from the French which has "La folle du logis s'en donne à coeur chagrin." (21)

To the cold grave in which her husband slept,
 One night, or haply more than one, through pain
 Or half-insensate impotence of mind,
 The fact was caught at greedily, and there
 She must be visitant the whole year through,
 Wetting the turf with never-ending tears,
 And all the storms of heaven must beat on her.

(Book VIII:1805–6; II:533–541)

Wordsworth's self-criticism, his remorse for the "wilfulness" of these "cravings" of the "first poetic faculty / Of plain Imagination and severe" ("From touch of this new power / Nothing was safe"¹¹) is deeply important for the obstinate self-questionings of Beckett's imaginative speculations in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Wordsworth judges the voraciousness and gluttony of the imagination faced with objects of suffering in terms of abuse and power: the power of plain Imagination is turned to the reducing of the distress of others to mere "matter for this humour." (I:531) material to satisfy the greed for the "tragic super-tragic." (I:532). And, as the widow-passage implies, it is the very *impotence* of grief that allows the power to have its way. The imagination seizes upon the fact and multiplies it — one or two nights become "the whole year through"; her momentary breaking is exaggerated into pseudo-poetic sublime, odious poetic fallacy: "never-ending tears" and the "storms of heaven." The voice in *Ill Seen Ill Said* commits the same imaginative and parasitical betrayal. Watching the woman being drawn to the "stone" of her husband's grave, he multiplies her act of bereavement into a nightly habit: "when the stone draws her then to her feet the prayer, Take her. Especially at night when the skies are clear." (12) He is making her up, causing her pain:

White half halo of hair. Face to the north. The tomb. Eyes on the horizon perhaps. Or closed to see the headstone. The withered crocuses. Endless evening. She lit aslant by the last rays. They make no difference. None to the black of the cloth. None to the white hair. It too dead still. In the still air. Voidlike calm as always. Evening and night. Suffice to watch the grass. How motionless it droops. Till under the relentless eye it shivers. With faintest shiver from its innermost. Equally the hair. Rigidly horrent it

¹¹ Quotations taken from the same passage in Book VIII, II:511–544.

shivers at last for the eye about to abandon. And the old body itself. When it seems of stone. Is it not in fact ashiver from head to foot? Let her but go and stand by the other stone. It white from afar in the pastures. And the eye go from one to the other. Back and forth. What calm then. And what storm. Beneath the weeds' mock calm. (29–30)

Beckett portrays the voice in the act of wishful thinking, the imagining eye in the act of relentless composition. The concealed Wordsworthian context elucidates the Dantescan details, for in hell Dante's gaze is painful to the shivering damned.¹² The Dantescan details issue out from the voracious wilfulness of the plain, severe imagination. They are just another feature of the craving for exaggeration, heightened tragic, super-tragic effect. The eye desires grief, wishes for the "storm" beneath the calm which, like Wordsworth's "storms of heaven," signal the operation of greedy composition and its poetic prose. The phrase "weeds' mock calm" itself mocks, finally, the real grief of the woman under watch; it places her body and mind within the close confines of the treacherous imperatives of the speculative, pseudo-poetic imagination ("Suffice to watch . . ."; "Let her but go . . .").

The mythology of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, then, forms part of a speculative project of exaggerating the object of contemplation out of all proportion, out of existence: "Let her vanish. And the rest (. . .) Finished high and low. Nothing but black and white. Void. Nothing else." (31) The concealed allusion to Wordsworth therefore contextualizes the overt Dante machinery.

It is the Romantics, too, who give another light to the choice of Venus. Wordsworth wrote a sonnet addressed to the planet:

Though joy attend thee orient at birth
Of dawn, it cheers the lofty spirit most
To watch thy course when Day-light, fled from earth,
In the grey sky hath left his lingering ghost,
Perplexed as if between a splendour lost

¹² A common question in the deeper circles of hell is "Perchè mi peste?". Beckett has inverted the canto 32 relationship: Dante shivers when watching the freezing betrayers; the betraying eye makes its victim shiver and freeze to stone.

And splendour slowly mustering. Since the Sun,
 The absolute, the world-absorbing One,
 Relinquished half his empire to the host
 Emboldened by thy guidance, holy Star,
 Holy as princely, who that looks on thee
 Touching, as now, in thy humility
 That mountain borders of this seat of care,
 Can question that they countenance is bright,
 Celestial Power, as much with love as light?¹³

The contest in *Ill Seen Ill said* is equally between two kinds of light, two kinds of looking. The light of love, the loving look ("Rigid with face and hands against the pane she stands and marvels long." [9]) and the light of the absolute that absorbs the world "devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle." [59])

One of Coleridge's first poems was addressed to the Evening Star, identifying its light of pure joy and calm delight with the maid he loves:

Must she not be, as is thy placid sphere
 Serenely brilliant? Whilst to gaze a while
 Be all my wish 'mid Fancy's high career
 E'en till she quit this scene of earthly toil;
 Then Hope perchance might fondly sight to join
 Her spirit in thy kindred orb, O Star benign!¹⁴

¹³ "To the Planet Venus, an Evening Star; composed at Loch Lomond," *Poetical Works*.

¹⁴ "To the Evening Star". Coleridge remembered this poem in his notebook in 1811: "I have never seen the evening Star set behind the mountains but it was as if I had lost a Hope out of my Soul — as if a Love were gone, & a sad Memory only remained — / O it was my earliest affection, the Evening Star / — One of my first utterances in verse was an address to it, as I was returning from the New River, and it looked newly-bathed as well as I / I remember that the substance of the Sonnet was that the woman whom I could ever love, would surely have been emblemized in the pensive serene brightness of the Planet — that we were both constellated to it, & would after death return thither / — " *The Notebooks*, note 4055.

Ill Seen Ill Said translates Coleridge's bright Hope into its dark opposite: "Fancy's high career" becomes a murderous imagination; "quit this scene of earthly turmoil" becomes the savage tone of "finish with it all at last. With her and her rags of sky and earth" (51); Hope's fond sigh becomes "the fond illusion of general havoc in train (. . .) Sigh upon sigh till all sighed away. All the fond trash (. . .) Last sighs. Of relief." (56); the wish to gaze becomes the wishful craving of the devouring eye. But traces of Coleridge's hope remain and give other accents to the voice's out-and-out betrayal. They give a hint to the other reasons, loving reasons, behind the voice's desire to stay on and see her for one moment more.

This double tone in the Beckett text, at once denying and remembering romantic gestures, is Tennysonian. Tennyson also gazes at Venus with a double gaze. *In Memoriam* CXXI divides Venus into sad Hesper, ready to die with the buried sun, listening to the closing door while "life is darkened in the brain"; and bright Phosphor, light of waking and fresh beginning. In both cases, the planet is defined in relation to the sun, "the greater light."¹⁵ In *Lockesley Hall Sixty Years After*, "Hesper-Venus" is at once a possible site of paradise ("perhaps a world of never fading flowers"), and a vantage-point from where the earth might appear a "point of peaceful light."¹⁶ The inherent ambiguity of Venus in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, as harbinger of death and life, and as a dream of peace and escape from the earth, seems to me to originate in these Tennyson instances which enable a re-reading of *Ill Seen Ill Said* as distorted elegy, an old man's railing. In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, Venus is condemned to follow and be followed by the sun, "source of all life": an ironic reading-back on CXXI, since the poet's calm meditation on its double nature gives equal value to the desire to die and be buried with the lost Hallam, and the optimistic stirrings of new daily life — *Ill Seen Ill said* puts all the emphasis on the desire to die. The lines from *Lockesley Hall Sixty Years After*, though, give some indication of the yearning behind the woman's gaze towards Venus — the desire to die is at once a desire to join the departed (the *In Memoriam* allusion) and a desire for pure peace, out of this world, out of humanity (the *Lockesley* allusion). This Venus complex, Beckett's rewriting, and inheritance, of nineteenth-century readings, is paralleled by a self-allusion. Mercier and Camier are

¹⁵ Tennyson (466–467).

¹⁶ Tennyson (648–649).

also fascinated by Venus. Venus is "our sister-convict" for Camier, presumably because she too is slave to the Sun of life, in the double-bind Tennysonian manner. Mercier and Camier are also drawn to the Northern Lights, another radiant presence in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Mercier urges Camier to look north to see the pale gleams of the "ancients' Blessed Isles," and tells Camier that once seen "you'll never forget, you'll be back." I read this as an instance of Beckett's concern with the power of a dream of a peaceful afterlife on the memory and action of the solitary mind on earth, again in the Tennysonian manner, radiant astronomical light as points of peace.¹⁷

Further Victorian sources help us to see further, deeper links between the Northern Lights and the Venus-Vesper-Lucifer triad. In particular, they explain why the grave the woman visits is also situated in the North. The Northern Lights have clearly to do with Venus as Hesperus — the Northern Lights were traditionally interpreted as the shining of the Hesperides, the Isles of the Blest, the paradise of the ancients. "Face to the further confines the eye closes in vain to see. At last they appear an instant. North where she passes them always. Shroud of radiant haze. Where to melt into paradise." (ISIS 28) It is Coleridge who tells why the grave is with them in the North: as he relates, "OLD SCRATCH, by the Prophet Isaiah said to dwell and reign in *the* NORTH, and by him called LUCIFER, or Lightbearer, ut Lucus a non Lucendo, vel ut Mons a non movendo."¹⁸ This contradictory light is further elucidated by Coleridge: "The dry light, the lucific vision (...) meaning reason."¹⁹ Just as Venus has a double nature, so the North is double: at once the point of paradisal dream and where the dark lucific light of reason emanates. Ruskin discusses at some length the fable of the Hesperides in *Modern Painters*. He quotes Hesiod's account of them as daughters of the Night and of the sunset. The golden fruit in the garden are associated with Juno, the female power of marriage; and they are guarded by the Dragon, whom Ruskin associates with Dante's Geryon. Ruskin reads the myth as a fable about marriage: the memory of peace and plenty in marriage is watched over by the Hesperides; "household sorrow and desolation" is watched over by the Dragon, who unites "the powers of poison, and instant destruction." The North's double nature, then, may

¹⁷ *Mercier and Camier* (121).

¹⁸ *Notebooks*, vol. 3: note 4134.

¹⁹ *Aids to Reflection*, vol. 3: note 4134.

come from this mythological background, namely that the Hesperides housed both Juno's nymphs and the Spirit of Treachery. Ruskin's reading of the Hesperides fable deepens the Dantescan allusions, brings them into contact with the marriage theme, with the Romantic humanization of the mythological melodrama.²⁰ Ruskin also is enlightening on the particular crime committed by the returning stranger in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The ninth circle, according to Ruskin in *Fors Clavigera*, is reserved for "sins done in cold blood, without passion, or, more accurately contrary to passion, far down *below* the freezing point." (319) The "hell of Traitors" punishes "not the fraud, but the *cold-heartedness*, which is chiefly dreadful in it." (319) This clarifies certain phrases in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, such as "Quick find her again. In that black heart," (54) "This endless heart of winter," (50) "Frozen true to her wont she seems turned to stone," (28) "Stares as if shocked still by some ancient horror (. . .) That leaves the face stone cold." (28–29) It clarifies them not by re-stressing the diabolic exaggeration of the Dantescan references, but by redefining those references. Part of the "hell" of what the eye-scribe-mind has to endure, is the sight of the effects of his cold-heartedness, his frozen blood, which are terrible imitations of his own crime. His cold-heartedness has frozen her down below freezing point to a wintry misery — his crime has blackened her heart and she lives in the dark. Again, the Victorian sources humanize and internalize the interplanetary fictions of hell, earth and damnation.

Ill Seen Ill Said, with these Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Ruskin instances in mind, becomes a tale about confusion of opposites, of lights, of kinds of imagination. The voice is murderer and bereaved; the woman is loved one and victim; the hell of Traitors is the distant place to which the voice retires and the effects of his crime on earth; the North is paradisaical and luciferic, home of radiant marriage-dreams and of the Spirit of Treachery; Venus shines with both love and with the desire to quit the scene; the planet is a place of peace and paradise outside the earth, yet is also slave to the "greater light," master of life and death, new beginnings and darkenings of the brain: "Such now the confusion between them once so twain. And such the farrago from eye to mind." (ISIS 40)

Two cultures, French and English, are also confused. Colette's dying and the memories of the Occupation in France change the book into a

²⁰ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*:586–598.

earful tale of the consequences of the organized violence and atrocities of the war upon the imagining mind. Wordsworth and Coleridge bring the book into a context where the reader must brood upon the fearful consequences of a voracious imagination, an appetite for the super-tragic, a commingling of the loving and lucific gaze. *Ill Seen Ill Said* is neither determined by these sources, nor does it merely genuflect towards them. They constitute its cultural memory, and that cultural memory, like our own personal memories when we do not openly recall, is a latent force that illuminates, judges and reflects upon the later words when the reader chooses to chase up the traces. Beckett understood that entering a language, imagining language, meant stepping into a force-field of countless sources, innumerable memories, a site where the spirit of treachery roams (lucific hunger for sensation) and where the imaginary lights of love and desire are dubious. But the quality of his allusions to the past prove that Beckett never believed responding to cultural memories was the exclusive, deadly work of the lucific mind. Traces from the past do not put an end to the book one reads, but rather help provide another context, a human context to the phantom dramas of literature. The use of sources, the investigation of cultural memories in the text, should be adjuncts to a *heartfelt* research and try never to say farewell to the tenacious trace of true feeling. (ISIS 59)

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