# Samuel Beckett's Lyrical Ballads

ANNE STILLMAN

---

In Samuel Beckett's late prose work, *Company*, 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.':

> You take pity on a hedgehog out in the cold and put it in an old hatbox with some worms. This box with the hog inside you then place in a disused hutch wedging the door open for the poor creature to come and go at will. To go in search of food and having eaten to regain the warmth and security of its box in the hutch. There then is the hedgehog in its box in the hutch with enough worms to tide it over. A last look to make sure all is as it should be before taking yourself off to look for something else to pass the time heavy already on your hands at that tender age. The glow at your good deed is slower than usual to cool and fade. You glowed readily in those days but seldom for long. Hardly had the glow been kindled by some good deed on your part or by some little triumph over your rivals or by a word of praise from your parents or mentors when it would begin to cool and fade leaving you in a very short time as chill and dim as before. Even in those days. But not this day. It

Anne Stillman, 'Samuel Beckett's Lyrical Ballads'
*Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014), 110-139
ISSN: 2049-1166.

was on an autumn afternoon you found the hedgehog and took pity on it in the way described and you were still the better for it when your bedtime came. Kneeling at your bedside you included it the hedgehog in your detailed prayer to God to bless all you loved. And tossing in your warm bed waiting for sleep to come you were still faintly glowing at the thought of what a fortunate hedgehog it was to have crossed your path as it did. A narrow clay path edged with sere box edging. As you stood there wondering how best to pass the time till bedtime it parted the edging on the one side and was making straight for the edging on the other when you entered its life. Now the next morning not only was the glow spent but a great uneasiness had taken its place. A suspicion that all was perhaps not as it should be. That rather than do as you did you had perhaps better let good alone and the hedgehog pursue its way. Days if not weeks passed before you could bring yourself to return to the hutch. You have never forgotten what you found then. You are on your back in the dark and have never forgotten what you found then. The mush. The stench.

Impending for some time the following. Need for company not continuous. Moments when his own unrelieved a relief. Intrusion of voice as such. Similarly his own. Regret then at having brought them about and problem how dispel them. Finally what meant by his own unrelieved? What possible relief? Leave it at that for a moment.[1]

[1] *Company* (London: John Calder, 1980; repr. 1996), pp. 38-41. Thanks to David Nowell Smith for some comments on a draft of this piece. Many thanks especially to Ryan Dobran for reading this essay, for making suggestions, and for editorial work. This essay is grateful to Edward Lee-Six and to Cal Revely-Calder for their writings on Beckett and for our readings and conversations around

Voicing these words creates the portrait of a speaker shown in the act of telling. How do you keep it company, or find yourself in its company? Speak the passage aloud and memory is at once distantly intimate and closely strange, both to the speaker committing the past to present narration, and for you, the reading and speaking voice, as you are guided, or commanded, or seduced, or haunted, by a voice that seems at once to address you and become you. The passage triangulates between a retrospective consciousness, the consciousness of the child, and an animal, although not in such a way to suggest that this trinity is comprised of clearly navigable points; each may be figments of one another. The closeness of the voice to your own ear may be precisely what beckons you into its person while at the same time revealing a chasm between what may or may not be a first and a second person, as if we are caught between the fixed gaze of the 'Reader' and 'Listener' in *Ohio Impromptu*, as they raise their heads at the end of the play and '*look at each other. Unblinking*'.[2] In *Company* such intimate distances unfold as memories, 'repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, yes I remember.'[3] The writing imagines the contours of intimacy and strangeness as deeply interfused. Beckett rediscovers the extraordinary in this ordinary truth by allowing us to hear how such an intertexture could sound, the chimes and echoes glow and fade like shards of lullabies, among the edges of hutch, clay, mush, stench. Our memories themselves can be as recognizable and as unknowable as the life of a small creature, as 'this box with the hog inside you' is at once that familiar deed ('you then place in a disused hutch') and an unfathomable pit. Prose line-endings are usually the work of the compositor, and not the artist, but in *Company* the line-endings of the prose seem not merely compositorial, but compositional (and this differs between editions of

Beckett's work. I am especially grateful to Eric Griffiths, my teacher. Many of the thoughts on Beckett and Shakespeare are indebted to his teaching.

[2] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986, repr. 1990), p. 448.

[3] *Company*, p. 20.

the text of *Company*).[4] A gap opens between how we see the words and how we might voice them, a space widening into an ineluctable gulf as we imagine it corresponding to the perplexities of a being in time. Typing up the passage, you continually come up against the pitfalls and possibilities suggested by the *mise-en page* and the various editions of the text: how words look, fit, or misfit, seem to be themselves stitches in measure. The whole composition can dissolve into another pattern; a turn of a kaleidoscope, where each new configuration would radically alter the story, the person. The porousness of the 'you' interfusing with a speaker in a voicing, is on the page wrenched into another aspect. The textures and countertextures of the prose rhythms and the appearance of the writing on the page suggest at once porosity and deflection, dwelling and estrangement, such double aspects as also meet here inside the small creatures in its heart. Animal life and death can be the occasion for the mind's inability to encompass the unfathomable, something as unfathomable as perhaps the being you once were. Beckett's writing makes no such large pronouncements, but lightly conjures these vast, unknown worlds in the edges of familiar words, 'when you entered its life'. 'You have never forgotten what you found then. You are on your back in the dark and have never forgotten what you found then'. This vividly illuminates the opaque, the unknowable, the unnameable. In one sense, yes, *you* have never forgotten, as you, reader, never knew. At once an epitaph for a void, as never forgotten, a matter never gone dead; at the same time, just dead matter: 'The mush. The stench'. The makeshift shelter given to the creature by the child of a tender age, slips from being a refuge made out of pity, to a hutch where fear and trembling dwell. A relation is suggested between an 'elemental refuge and human speech at the well-spring of poetic origin'.[5] Such an origin is here also an end, a grave. In this sense, the writing is as concerned with the inchoate remainder of life as it is with the past. This is not just an event in life, it is what gives life an inside.[6]

---

[4] The differences between the edition published by John Calder and that reprinted in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996). The French edition, like Calder's, uses larger type set in blocks. My typed version differs again from both of these.

[5] J. H. Prynne, 'Huts', *Textual Practice*, 22.4, pp. 613-633 (p. 623).

[6] Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 26.

*Company* is my optic for this essay, which begins by sketching relations between Wordsworth and Beckett, turning some of their works into companionable forms as an occasion for thinking about how to do things with the word lyric. What follows divides into four parts. First, Wordsworth and Beckett meet under the aspect of repetition as play, translation, negation, pleasure and unpleasure. The essay then aims to put to practice the suggestion that Beckett's late theatrical writing can give us ways of imagining the lyric. It argues against limiting lyric to certain literary-critical territories, invoking Shakespeare's theatrical work as a terrain where the mode of lyric is able to possess dramatic and theatrical instances of poetic writing and making such as perhaps are thought to lie outside of lyric as a genre. The final section returns to Beckett's late plays as prisms for lyric. The ensemble of shades in *Company* revolve obscurely across all these materials; a magic-lantern casting shadows 'repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone': contours of memory beheld and dissolved, the edges of pronouns bewildered, a life mined and buried.

*

In an aside, Christopher Ricks once compared Wordsworth and Beckett: "'Resolution and Independence"; "Old Man Travelling"; "Animal Tranquillity and Decay"; "Argument for Suicide"; "The Beggars"; "Incipient Madness"; "The Recluse" – the Wordsworthian titles speak of, and to, the lasting apprehensions that these visionary writers share, apprehensions of solitude, ageing, distaste, exacerbation, induration, distance, and distaste."[7] The comparison is fleeting and suggestive, and it's part of this essay's hope to expand it in some aspects. Here is 'Old Man Travelling' as it first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*:

OLD MAN TRAVELLING;

ANIMAL TRANQUILITY AND DECAY,

[7] 'Samuel Beckett' [review of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*' (2000)], in *Reviewery* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 315.

*A SKETCH*

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought – He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
–I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
'Sir! I am going many miles to take
'A last leave of my son, a mariner,
'Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
'And there is dying in an hospital'.[8]

Being spell-bound by a subject is an atmosphere deeply shared by Wordsworth and Beckett. Here, the absorption into the old man's face, step, gait, as 'one expression', then splintering again, to limb, look, and bending figure, resonates with Beckett's powers of melting into others. As in 'Afar a Bird': 'Ruinstrewn land, he has trodden it all night long, I gave up, hugging the hedges, between road and ditch, on the scant grass, little slow steps, no sound, stopping ever and again, every ten steps say, little wary steps, to catch his breath, then listen, ruinstrewn land'. Quite where, and at what distance, the powers to absorb exist in relation to their subject is blurred: 'open his eyes, raise his eyes, he merges in the hedge, afar a bird, a moment past he grasps and is fled, it was he had life, I didn't have life'.[9] Place, figure, thought in an 'Old Man Travelling' also form a common intertexture,

[8] *Lyrical Ballads and other Poems 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 110.
[9] *For to End Yet Again and other Fizzles* (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 39.

fringed with bird-life. And in Wordsworth's poem too it is unclear to whom animal tranquillity and decay belong, where and to whom life may belong. 'Old Man Travelling', as it appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*, is, like many poems by Wordsworth, a deeply strange poem masking as a very ordinary one. The sudden appearance of 'I asked him' is pointedly awkward, as if this other person might have been hiding behind a hedge, watching this singular gait, jotting down some observations on noble age from a safe distance with the luxury of a young man who has the time to spend sitting in the landscape: 'A man who does not move with pain, but moves | With thought.' Well, maybe in your thoughts. Then the sudden appearance of the old man's voice, and the tables turn: 'Sir! I am going many miles to take | A last leave of my son'. What was not pain in thought becomes pain in life. The man's words have a dying fall: 'Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth | And there is dying in an hospital'. How far is Falmouth? Will you get there on time? The awkwardness has a plangency. The transition into the old man's voice might be compared to Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said,* when 'this old so dying woman', watched from so near and so afar, seems not only to exist in 'the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else': 'If only all could be mere figment'.[10] Wordsworth's poem too turns on turning what could be in the madhouse of the skull into what might not be mere figment. In doing this, he writes a truthful poem because it is a poem that imagines how it might be mistaken. How can we end this poem? Merely stop? – or '*pause for echoes*'.[11] By ending this way, Wordsworth makes (in Beckett's phrase from *Not I*) a '*gesture of helpless compassion*'.[12] The poem breaks itself up, gives over to another ending, another, elsewhere, dying. Sadly, Wordsworth mended the poem. The old man's voice is cut from 1805, as he vanishes from the title, and the poem ends with 'what the old man hardly feels'. 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay' becomes a tidy meditation on endurance.

Wordsworth and Beckett both return repeatedly to contemplate the 'ruinstrewn' of another, and to the potentially self-strewn act of finding contemplation through

[10] *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982), p. 20.
[11] *Footfalls* in *Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 397-403 (p. 403).
[12] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 375.

another; this is one way their works manifest imaginations devoted to and possessed by repetition and revision. In his note to *The Thorn*, Wordsworth describes how a consciousness of the deficiencies of language prompts a 'craving in the mind': clinging to repetition a bewildered speaker lurches for a word she cannot find. The note then goes on to explore how repetition is also representative of 'beauties of the highest kind'; under this second aspect, the mind does not stammer after words it cannot find, but experiences love for words themselves as '*things* active and efficient'.[13] The inconsistency of the note is precisely its strength in characterising the double-mindedness of a literary practice. Beckett's self-revisions and self-translations live through repetition in this double aspect and show how he is exceptionally conscious of what he himself described in his early essay on Proust as 'that most necessary, wholesome and monotonous plagiarism—the plagiarism of oneself'.[14] To plagiarise yourself may be 'wholesome' in the sense that you might make some part of yourself more whole by retrieving an origin and repeating it again. At the same time, such return can make what might have once seemed whole fall apart. As in *what is the word.* This poem translates Beckett's earlier *Comment dire*. But that statement asserts too much, and says not enough. If, say, *what is the word* is what becomes of *Comment dire*, then such becoming is also how those first words come undone. Or, *what is the word* may be how *Comment dire* ends up, winding up by beginning again. In order to make an end, begin again:

| | |
|---|---|
| Comment dire | what is the word |
| | |
| folie – | folly – |
| folie que de – | folly for to – |
| que de – | for to – |
| comment dire – | what is the word – |
| folie que de ce – | folly from this – |
| depuis – | all this – |
| folie depuis ce – | folly from all this – |
| donné – | given – |
| folie donné ce que de – | folly given all this |

[13] *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Butler and Green, p. 351.
[14] *Proust* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), p. 20.

| | |
|---|---|
| vu – | seeing – |
| folie vu ce – | folly seeing all this – |
| ce – | this – |
| comment dire – | what is the word –[15] |

The poems begin and begin again, for 50 lines the word set comes and goes, in the English version permeated by 'glimpse', 'seem', 'what', 'where', 'over', 'afar', 'away', 'afaint', ending up in a long line, 'folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what –' then, the poem makes an end by beginning to begin again, 'what – | what is the word.'[16] Travelling from French to English, the poem's own compositional history seems itself to become the ghostly subject of what is perhaps the last piece Beckett ever wrote.[17] Looking at the two works side by side is (in Joyce's phrase) a *Verbivocovisual* kind of experience, as the search for a word unfolds across two tongues, as if what is sought, or what eludes the seeker, may only exist in some place between these jagged lines, 'traits de désunion'.[18] A *Verbivocovisual* experience that is also a philosophical experience, and one well characterised by the thought experiments of Wittgenstein when he wondered: '(Ask yourself: "What would it be like if human beings never found the word that was on the tip of their tongue?")' Or:

> 'Yes, I know the word. It's on the tip of my tongue.' – here the idea forces itself on one, of the gap which [William] James speaks of, which only this word will fit into, and so on. – One is somehow already experiencing the word, as it were, although it is not yet there. – One experiences a *growing* word.[19]

---

[15] *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett, A critical edition*, ed. by Seàn Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), pp. 226-9.

[16] See Steven Connor's discussion of finality and repetition in Samuel Beckett, *Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-14, and Marjorie Perloff's account of *what is the word* 'Beckett the Poet' in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 211-226.

[17] For a detailed study of the compositional history of these poems see Dirk Van Hulle, *The Making of Samuel Beckett's* 'Stirrings still / 'Soubresauts' *and* 'comment dire' / 'what is the word' (Antwerp: University Press, 2011).

[18] 'SB called these dashes – or hyphens (in French "traits d'union") –"traits de désunion."' In Lawlor and Pilling, p. 474.

[19] *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953; repr. 1997), p. 219; *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman; trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe and others (Oxford, 1980), p. 254.

Beckett's poem lives inside this phenomenology—'a *growing* word'. Wittgenstein's remarks prompt us to reflect on the difference between a poem depicting the pains and pleasures of this state, and an experience of this kind for a person who suffers from aphasia after a stroke. Yet *Comment dire* and *what is the word* are not telling us about this experience, they are 'a *growing* word'. That is, the poems dramatize the plenitude in which ever-expanding linguistic vistas rise before the mind as you experience not finding the word you are looking for, rather as *Company* takes you inside the phenomenological contours of memory. It's as if the poems depict how an increasing awareness of vacancy (the word you can't find) prompts only more words to appear on the horizon of consciousness. *Comment dire* and *what is the word* grow words out of other words, until their referents gather both obscure sediments and expanding horizons through recurrence. Beckett's end-of-life words take us back to the beginnings of life, to language acquisition: how we learn words, how we find them, or how they find us, elude us. The loss of the particular word dramatized through the material of words might also be understood by referring to what Hegel meant when he spoke of language negating the particular and of the inherent negativity of language. Words in language are inherently general: the word 'table' specifies no particular table; understanding the meaning of the word involves the negation of all particular tables in their particularity, and the recognition of a concept of 'table' which covers all tables by naming no particular table. This negation of the particular will take place with regard to the consciousness of any particular language user when she recognises that what is true for 'table' is true for 'I' and 'She'. Folly to think you could find the word. *Comment dire* …. *the* word. A phantom singular, with whispered insistence, borne into the English version.

Under one aspect, *what is the word* seems to complete *Comment dire*. Imagined in this way, the two poems embrace as companionable forms; equally, it may be precisely this monotonous return which leaves the possibility of completeness in tatters. 'That most necessary, wholesome and monotonous plagiarism – the plagiarism of oneself' sharply brings out how through repetition 'pleasure and unpleasure are [...] bound together, depending upon and successively producing

each other'.[20] *Comment dire* and *what is the word* at once toy with repeating sounds, as *Company* brings voices back to play as company, or as the narrator of *First Love* begins 'playing with the little cries, a little in the same way as I had played with the song, on, back, on, back, if that may be called playing'. At the same time, the poems are imprisoned by returning utterances, haunted by the 'problem of how dispel them' (*Company*), or by the very act of uttering even, in the words which begin *The Unnamable*: 'affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, sooner or later.'[21] To say that this double aspect, of utterance as both a material plaything and as an endless play of negation, runs through Beckett's works, as a thread runs through a tapestry would be to put it mildly. It is rather intrinsic to the atmosphere of his life-work. In one instance, Beckett says (of Joyce) that 'his writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*'; on another occasion, it is precisely the 'terrible materiality of word surface' which Beckett hopes is 'capable of being dissolved': 'there is something paralysingly holy in the vicious nature of the word'.[22]

Beckett's tussle between repetition's pleasure and unpleasure, between words at once clasped in an embrace of mutual dependence and caught in the vice of reciprocal production, speaks not only to Wordsworth's note to *The Thorn* but also to a moment in his *Essays on Epitaphs*:

> Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with; they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those possessed vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had the power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of

[20] Connor, p. 9.
[21] *Collected Shorter Prose* (London: John Calder, 1988), p. 19; *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959; repr. 1976), p. 293.
[22] 'From 'Dante … Bruno. Vico . . Joyce' and 'German Letter of 1937' [to Axel Kahn, translated by Martin Esslin] both collected in *Disjecta*: *Miscellaneous Writings and Fragments* (London: John Calder, 1983, repr. 2001), p. 27; p. 172.

> gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.[23]

Both Wordsworth and Beckett sound of several minds at once: worshipful and iconoclastic towards the word, in awe of an object of thought and equally fascinated by a material power to destroy, or the power of thought to destroy materials. There is between them, you could say, a philosophical tension at play between whether states of consciousness precede linguistic expression, or whether language itself is a part of consciousness. Yet the contradictions cover such a range that we might understand this shared uneven texture to be both a source of confusion and possibly madness as well as a source of creative strength. Language as an incarnate force and a power to dissolve are intimately bound up with one another. The entanglement is tantalising to the imagination while also being a source of despair. Frances Ferguson's account of this moment from the *Essays on Epitaphs* speaks powerfully for Beckett's life works also:

> For the "fallings from us," the "vanishings" within the life of the individual, and the multiple miniature deaths which figure as part of that Wordsworthian life suggest that neither human incarnation nor linguistic incarnation is a fixed form which can be arrived at and sustained. The life of language in poetry, like the life of an individual, is radically implicated with death; and out of the discontinuities of both language and life, Wordsworth wrests a poetry of memory which enacts and re-enacts the impossibility of constructing one individual self which would be "there" for language to imitate.[24]

Ferguson's lucid account captures what Beckett and Wordsworth share. *Company* is well described by her words, 'language can be thought of as external "something other" only within the context of an internal dialectic, in which the self becomes a being "made up of many beings" so that language and individual consciousness can seem temporally separable from one another.'[25] This crux makes up the fabric of Wordsworth's and Beckett's writings (very differently, with urgent differences),

---

[23] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols., ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), II, pp. 84-5.
[24] *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. xvi.
[25] Ferguson, pp. xvi-xvii.

but, in each case, with such intensity that we might say such forces serve as motivic energy for both artists, felt, for instance, in the compositional self-revisions that make up their respective life-works. Language both as incarnation and counter-spirit, weaves through what follows.

*

I've borrowed the title *Lyrical Ballads* for Samuel Beckett not so much to draw up such similarities between Wordsworth and Beckett as there may be and are, nor to define what either Wordsworth or Coleridge or Beckett may have taken either of those words to mean, but rather to provisionally allow the conjunction of these words into the vicinity of some selected works by Beckett, some of which we may wish to name lyric poems, others plays, although as my opening example from *Company* shows, may also include dramatic writing not expressly written for the theatre. The words 'lyrical ballads' can be imagined as distilling aspects of Beckett's late short works. Hitching 'Samuel Beckett's' in front of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's name for their collection could seem whimsical. Or, worse, as I'm not claiming any particular fidelity to what Wordsworth or Coleridge might have meant by 'ballad', or what Beckett would mean by this word, my title might sound like a false appropriation, a gimmick. But aspects of the word 'ballad' speak to the cross-currents between Wordsworth and Beckett – such energies as are not merely 'shared', but act as mutually illuminating forces of difference. Ballad, from *ballare*, to dance, can evoke apparent simplicity, song, storytelling, refrain, a passing down of a song sung in an old style – such elements all have obscure footfalls in *Lyrical Ballads* and in Beckett's late plays. One of the creative pressures the word 'ballad' is subjected to in *Lyrical Ballads* is an exquisite hovering, a voice on the cusp between speech and song. The main body of 'The Pet Lamb: A Pastoral' is a verse-fantasy of a ballad the little maid *might* sing. Reading this poem the imagined song is both elusive and all that's there, as the words at once embody the ballad and empty its presence by their very prospect as a perpetual possibility. This extended brink, the moment the poem seems to both stay within and spirit away, is an edge between

words and song crystallised by Beckett's *Words and Music*, where 'WORDS: [*trying to sing.*]' is a refrain.

Wordsworth's ventriloqual shapes speak with the different ways Beckett's late plays cross music with storytelling, lapsed time and spatio-temporal performance in time, embodied voice and disembodiment, recorded voice and live voice, speakers and auditors, readers and listeners, words and croaks. Beckett's works create the appearance, as ballad can, of persons who are being spoken or sung through: an old story, an old style, can come back to the future in ballad, as recording can make a past self into a living hand-me-down. Critical studies of lyric poetry have made analogies between lyric voice and ventriloquism and possession.[26] *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *Not I*, each (in their different ways) play upon, turn around, disassociation between body and voice, and, as such, are works that can be optics for thinking about lyric poems. They may be more powerful engines of thought than any analogy with ventriloquism or possession can be because they are themselves works of art that ask for performance. Like *Company*, their material is 'being beside oneself'; as plays, the metaphysical reach of this common expression is cast into space and time. We speak freely of 'disembodied' voices in poems. What happens if a voice is really being 'disembodied' and so, in another sense, deeply embodied, as in *Not I?* Here the speakers and listeners present in many of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* transform into 'MOUTH' and 'AUDITOR'. The heard and overheard of lyrical ballad are here incarnated, if that's the right word, for bodies so palpably absent, so counter-spirited by the work in which they find themselves as materials.

Say I describe Beckett's late dramatic works as models showing us the structures of lyric. This makes them sound very much less alive than they are; indeed these works fend off any such platitude. Yet this body of writing has much to give to the study of lyric. In the recent *The Lyric Theory Reader*, a critical anthology claiming to be representative of 'lyric theory' in the twentieth century, Beckett only appears twice in the index, an unfortunate fact, in the bulky 641 pages, when not only his poems but his late plays and shorter prose would give to many of those

[26] Susan Stewart, 'Lyric Possession', *Critical Inquiry*, 22.1 (1995), 34-63.

contributors a rich field in which to practice and to test their claims.[27] Beckett's late works provide an occasion for doing things with the word lyric that is strongly opposed to limiting our definition of this word to 'short non-narrative poems': 'if narrative is about what happens next, lyric is about what happens now – in the reader's engagement with each line – and teachers and scholars should celebrate its singularity, its difference from narrative.'[28] Culler's notions of 'what happens now' may seem to hold good for short poems:

imagine si ceci
un jour ceci
un beau jour
imagine
si un jour
un beau jour ceci
si ceci
cessait
imagine[29]

Beckett's lines revolve and dissolve on the permutations between si/ceci/cessait – perhaps half rhyming the mildly apprehensive with the wild longing to have done apprehending, the poem may be an event of a lyric 'now', the dawning of thought, not smugly cocooned within such a phantom present because the temporal apprehension comes tinged with the kind of conceptual vertigo wracking Augustine when he describes the passage of time, 'the past increases in proportion as the future diminishes, until the future is entirely absorbed and the whole becomes the past.'[30] How we experience such temporality depends on how we encounter a poem. Poems, whether named short or long, constantly baffle any razor-sharp edge between when is 'next' and what is 'now', what is long and when

[27] *The Lyric Theory Reader,* ed. by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
[28] 'Why Lyric?', *PMLA*, 123.1 (2008), 201-6 (p. 202).
[29] The poem as it appears in Lawlor and Pilling's edition, p. 212. As they explain, they have reinstated line 7 'si ceci' as it appeared in *Hand and Eye* in 1977, in the 'Sottisier' notebook, and in the copy of the poem Beckett wrote on the back of a cigarette packet for Josette Hayden. As it was omitted in the typescript Beckett produced for Minuit, possibly in error, the line did not appear in subsequent editions. See Lawlor and Pilling, p. 454.
[30] *Confessions*, XI, xxvii, ed. and trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 277.

is short, not least because in reading or writing about such works, in quoting from them, in attempting to describe the phenomenology of reading and hearing, I become a kind of storyteller, and am bound to think and write in ways that are narrative. Narratives of compositional history colour how we might understand a poem's depiction of temporality, while such understandings need not depend on tracing compositional histories. Beckett's lines are part of *mirlitonnades*, written, we are told by one edition, 'spasmodically on scraps of paper. Nothing dated'. While the lines of this group of poems were sometimes written down on café bills and other scraps, Beckett also copied and arranged them into the *mirlitonnades* 'sottisier' notebook; both spasm and sequence, of poem, of person, matter to how the suite is heard in time.[31] The *mirlitonnades* look quite different when they are printed as poems given individual pages or as running across pages in a sequence, as 'imagine si ceci' had yet another face when Beckett wrote the lines on a pack of cigarettes for Josette Hayden back in the happy days when images of the dead didn't adorn cigarette packs; now the gift might be a kind of joke. It might be pleasing to know if 'imagine si ceci' was written on a pack of Gauloises or of Gitanes, and yet the current literary-critical fashion for fetishizing material objects can itself tenaciously limit how poems live in time. When we welcome a whole poem or part of a poem into our writing what form of company are we hoping for? The form revered as an idol and the body bullied and subdued can seem the same.

In Wordsworth's poem 'The Two April Mornings' the first speaker frames the words spoken by his figment-companion, Matthew, whose story, apparently spoken on 'that morning' when the poem begins, makes up the main body of the verse. It ends by burying the body that was speaking for most of the poem:

> Matthew is in his grave, yet now
> Methinks I see him stand,
> As at that moment, with his bough
> Of wilding in his hand.[32]

[31] Quoted in *Collected Poems 1930-1978* (London: John Calder, 1986; repr. 1999), p. 176; see the preface to *Selected Poems 1930-1988*, ed. by David Wheatley (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).
[32] *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Butler and Green, p. 215.

The poem's powers to apprehend the apparitional, to write epitaphs for the dead and to make company come back, depend on being narrative, and rhyme is part of this plot. The poem is told in quatrains, the verse-form is its narrative, the commonplaces the voices are bound to share. 'Now' and 'That moment' here possess long shadows, such penumbral wastes of time residing in any moment when 'ceci' dissolves into 'cessait'. Wordsworth's 'yet now/ Methinks I see him stand' repeats the story of a recurring singularity. 'Now' splinters into the wilderness of times and persons making up the privileges and predicaments of being a person, a state illuminated by Beckett's *That Time,* where 'moments of one and the same voice A B C relay one another without solution of continuity', and where the listener's face and breath absorb voices 'that are his own coming to him from both sides and above.'[33]

The desire to limit lyric to short seemingly 'non-narrative' poems is, we are told, part of a wish to guard the study of formal poetics from the floods of broad historicist and 'novelizing' readings that are apparently so prolific and which tell us all about the motivations of, say, Browning's speaker, but say nothing about how his verses are made. Instead, Culler says we should 'take lyric to be short non-narrative poems whose most salient characteristics remain to be defined' so that we can 'displace the dominant pedagogical paradigm that sees lyrics as fundamentally dramatic monologues.'[34] The argument depends on characterizing its opponents as naïve readers, preoccupied by 'dramatic situation' and so depriving 'rhythm and sound patterning of any constitutive role', as if these elements could only ever work to exclude one another. The 'new lyric studies' should 'propose new normative models of lyric, emphasising features that can become the basis of new typologies – such as the distinction between lyrics in the present tense, which exploit that special temporality of lyric, and those in the past, which offer brief anecdotes that genre makes specify.' Some of the distinctions here seem to be more representative of the marking out of institutional territories than reflective of artistic or teaching practices. If you asked students to sort poems and parts of poems into 'lyrics' and 'dramatic monologues' they would see at once

[33] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 387.
[34] 'Why Lyric?', p. 203.

how the exercise would be completely superficial if it was consistently straightforward. Dividing poems into 'normative models', such as lyrics in the present tense and those in the past would be merely fantastical if individual poems *in practice* did not diverge from such model 'norms'. Pedagogy is criticised for a fundamental paradigm, but then its displacement is called for by strict adherence to other fundamentally certain tenants. Of course it can be tedious to hear everything described as 'Lyric' or 'Lyrical'. Turn to the blurbs on the back of many novels and you will find that so many authors write successful 'Lyrical Prose.' The magic word is used for advertising, like cosmetics promising to 'stop time' and erase the narrative wrinkles on your face. Yet despite perhaps wishing to guard lyric as specifically poetic, we need not zealously and hermetically seal this word away from 'narrative' or 'dramatic'; the power of these features to intermingle can matter deeply for lyric poems, something perhaps Culler would not wholly disagree with, as he imagines 'the lyric speaker not as a character in a novel, whose motivations must be elucidated, but as a performer picking up traditional elements and presenting them to an audience' – possibly like the prismatic voice of *That Time*. Not all novels insist that motivations must be elucidated, but perhaps Culler's insistence on lyric being 'non-narrative' means rather that what determines lyric as a genre are shared elements which are themselves irreducible to narrative. So, accordingly, if the mode of lyric is able to possess instances of poetic writing such as are thought to lie outside of lyric as genre, then we should still know what those determinates are in order to recognise that they are being possessed. Yet a practice need not be imagined as grounded in a set of criteria more generally expressible than those expressed by the writing. 'Lyric' is not a category constituted by fixed determinants in the same way that, say, liquid can be defined by possessing a fixed volume. The desired empiricism begins to take on the qualities of *Alice in Wonderland* : to know a lyric as definitively 'short' we may have to nibble a curious mushroom, and raise ourselves to about two feet high.

*

Shakespeare's plays turn what we may mean by 'dramatic', 'narrative' and 'lyric' into a mingled complextion because his poetic dramas turn human action into poetry, and turn poetry into a human action; that is, they show how lyrical utterance works as dramatic action. Take a familiar but magnificent example, Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death in *Hamlet*. The speech is praised for its lyrical prettiness, but the trouble with such instances in Shakespeare's writing is that they themselves acquire a celebrated aura, making them hard to hear. To treat this as a specimen of Shakespeare's lyrical powers in an anthology would be to muffle the dramatic work that the lyric is here being tasked with:

> *Queen*. One woe doth tread upon anothers heele,
> So fast they'l follow: your Sister's drown'd *Laertes*.
> *Laer*. Drown'd, O where ?
> *Queen*. There is a Willow growes ascaunt a Brooke
> That showes his hore leaves in the glassie streame:
> There with fantasticke Garlands did she come,
> Of Crow-flowers, Nettles, Daysies, and long Purples
> That liberall Shepheards give a grosser name,
> But our cold maydes doe Dead Mens Fingers call them:
> There on the pendant boughes, her Coronet weedes
> Clambring to hang; an envious sliver broke,
> When downe the weedy Trophies, and her selfe,
> Fell in the weeping Brooke, her clothes spred wide,
> And Marmaide-like awhile they bore her up,
> Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes,
> As one incapable of her owne distresse,
> Or like a creature Native and indewed
> Unto that Element: but long it could not be,
> Till that her garments, heavy with theyr drinke,
> Pul'd the poore wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.
> *Laer*. Alas then, is she drown'd?
> *Quee*. Drown'd, drown'd.[35]

[35] *The Tragedie of Hamlet* (IV. Vii) [Folio, but 'theyr drink' and 'melodious lay' from Q2), *A Facsimile of the First Folio* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

This speech is not a song, but it sings (in one sense) of a person or now mermaid-like creature, half mild, half wild, a being we last saw entering 'distracted' and singing. Gertrude's on-stage audience, Laertes and Claudius, are listening to this description of an off-stage death. How do they hear Gertrude side-stepping the question of whether Ophelia fell or was pushed, or how she may be avoiding the suggestion of suicide? Her description diverts us by distracting her on-stage audience. Shakespeare frames the lyrical flight with flat repetitions, 'your Sister's drown'd'; 'is she drown'd?; 'Drown'd drown'd'. This frame spotlights the circularity of Gertrude's soaring and then sinking, 'to muddy death'. Her lyrical speech makes up a tissue of innuendo and diversion creating a double acoustic unique to Shakespeare in its capacity to sound two ways at once. Here, a sound at once as light and fair as the maid Ophelia might once have been, and a din wretched with muck, an exquisite flower with another dirty name. What actually happened? 'An envious sliver broke'. Did Gertrude see this herself, or did she hear about it through some other person? We want to ask her, in the words of Beckett's *Footfalls*, 'How could you have responded if you were not there?'[36] In order to describe the event in this way, it must have been witnessed, but no one helped Ophelia clamber out of her distress. Shakespeare briefly turns Gertrude into a curious type of creature, a narrator, a being with the power to be anywhere at any time, telling the story. She performs this narrative act by being lyrical. That is, her lyric powers are also a kind of free indirect style, as Gertrude and Ophelia here seem like living and dead figments able to merge into one another. The variegated 'snatches of old tunes', the mixed assembly of flowers, are doubled by the motley aspect of Gertrude's speech, as if she weaves a garland from set materials, so that it sounds as if she too is singing 'snatches of old tunes'. So the moment when Shakespeare makes Gertrude seem like a narrator is also the very point where she sounds most like another form of apparitional creature, a lyric voice, speaking a pastoral elegy for events she seems to have been tasked with seeing or privileged to witness - and yet she was not there. The nature of poetic drama is in the stereo effect between these aspects.

[36] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 403.

Shakespeare's poetic dramas are made out of sudden and unprepared transitions—such transitions that Coleridge found a defect of Wordsworth's verse. Here's an example from *King Lear*, an exchange between Edgar (disguised) and his blinded father. Things aren't going so well:

> *Alarum and Retreat within.*
> *Enter Edgar.*
> *Edg.* Away old man, give me thy hand, away:
> King *Lear* hath lost, he and his daughter tane,
> Give me thy hand: Come on.
> *Glo.* No further Sir, a man may rot even heere.
> *Edg.* What in ill thoughts againe?
> Men must endure
> Their going hence, even as their comming hither,
> Ripenesse is all come on.
> *Glo.* And that's true too.[37]

*Ripeness is all* is one of those luminous phrases of Shakespeare's which can seem to soar into lyrical lift-off, to exist beyond character, outside of scrambling action. Briefly, relentless dramatic time comes to some miraculous pause, as if in 'Men must endure | Their going hence, even as their comming hither, | Ripenesse is all', we hear not a character speaking, but the play speaking, or lamenting, for all its figures, perhaps, or for no one in particular. But *Ripeness is all* gains its force by occurring where it does, then vanishing into 'come on', answered by a mere gulp: 'And that's true too'. Editors will often punctuate Edgar's line, 'Ripeness is all. Come on.', and then space Gloucester's reply indented by a blank space, as if he's helpfully piping up with an extra four syllables to complete a chimerical pentameter.[38] But Shakespeare's verse is a tensile rhythmic membrane, not a metrical paint-by-numbers kit. The distinction between prose and verse is muddier in the Folio, as 'comming hither' glissades into 'come on'. The awkwardness of the transition resembles the end of *Old Man Travelling*; we might imagine 'And that's true too' as a lapse into helplessness. We should take care not to pry such gnomic

[37] *The Tragedie of King Lear* (V. ii), *A Facsimile of the First Folio.*
[38] See the *Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 244.

utterances as *Ripeness is all* loose from their imbedded dramatic context, which doesn't mean they score less on some phantom lyric scoreboard. The unpunctuated phrase looks ravaged in the Folio, 'Ripenesse is all come on'. Here the line possesses a vulnerable beauty. It is something Edgar says to his old, blinded father, Gloucester, who may, somehow, but probably does not wholly know, that he finds himself in the kind care of his son. Edgar might be trying to cheer his father up, a compassion cut here with a child's impatience for a parent. He turns his dad's sad word 'rot' into a strange fruit to divert him from the mush and stench of all that's been and will be, just before Gloucester slips away from the play into its dark wings.

'All writing is dramatic, though not all writing is theatrical. "Dramatic" in the sense that writing is an act of supplication to voice.'[39] Sometimes it may be problematic to allow a general term of this kind to cover everything, dissolving the particular in its wake, but it seems more troubling not to consider the relations between both the words 'dramatic' and 'theatrical', and the sometimes clear, sometimes murky, distinctions between these words when devoting study to the lyric. There seems to be a current of anti-theatrical and even anti-dramatic prejudice in studies of poetics at present, not so much with respect to the differences between how poems are (say) read and performed by poets and performers of poems as opposed to persons who may or may not be paid to read poems and who may or may not be called 'actors', but in the relation between lyric poems and (other) dramatic and theatrical materials with which poems could have a meaningful relation. Such relations matter not only because of the very obvious historical connection of 'lyric' to performance, but, in the English tradition, because of the deep imaginative and historical connections between Shakespeare's plays and lyric poets writing after Shakespeare, and the innumerable, varicoloured shades flickering between Shakespeare, verse drama, and the English long poem. We lose these colours with an achromatic definition of lyric.

*

[39] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 13.

Beckett is a lyric poet, in one sense, as a writer of poems. But if I call his late scripts 'lyrics' it may be heard as frivolous to some ears, or reductive to others, flattening the spatio-temporal projection for performance that is a script. Yet it still might be possible to read a play by Shakespeare or Beckett as a lyric poem while also understanding it to be a projection for performance, even if part of the pleasure of reading it as a poem is my own (possibly peculiar) way of imagining it to be unperformable. The rhythmic experience of reading Beckett's late plays takes on a double aspect: on one hand they are scripts, projections for performance, if only in imagination. Part of the work of reading is imagining how a projection for performance could be realised, incarnated by bodies and voices and materials. At the same time, running alongside this imaginative projection, and acting at times as a counter-spirit to it, is the experience of reading stage directions, encountering as written the temporal and rhythmic ambiguities of pauses, timings, and sounds which would be seen and heard in performance. Poetical making takes place in these intricate patterns measured between space and time and persons, where a set of apparently simple instructions opens up to a complex of rhythm in time. As at the end of *Nacht und Traüme*:

> 21. *Lied* as before (2)
> 22. Fade out evening light.
> 23. Close of *Lied* as before (4)
> 24. Fade out A as before (5)
> 25. A dreams. Fade up on B as before (6)
> 26. Move in slowly to close up of B, losing A.
> 27. Dream as before (7-16) in close up and slower motion.
> 28. Withdraw slowly to opening viewpoint, recovering A.
> 29. Fade out dream.
> 30. Fade out A.

Or *Ohio Impromptu*:

> [*Pause*]
> Nothing is left to tell.
> [*Pause. R makes to close book.*

*Knock. Book half closed.*]
Nothing is left to tell.
[*Pause. R closes book.*
*Knock.*
*Silence. Five seconds.*
*Simultaneously they lower their right hands to the table, raise their heads and look at each other. Unblinking. Expressionless.*
*Ten seconds.*
*Fade out.*][40]

These scripts are prisms for imagining lyric theatrically. Like Shakespeare, Beckett creates an interlace between verbal and physical pattern, such an interlace as Shakespeare's poetic dramas make, or that might be considered as analogous dance, and in particular, to what Alfred Gell means by the words 'style' and 'meaning' in his study of the ritual dance culture of the Umeda. Gell examines how there is no clear boundary 'in Umeda or perhaps anywhere', 'between dance and non-dance':

> […] we always find the self-consciously graceful walk that seems to continually refer to the dance without quite becoming it, and the half-hearted dance that lapses back to the security of mere locomotion. Yet it also remains true that there is a gap, a threshold however impalpable, that is crossed when the body begins to dance rather than simply move. This gap is less a matter of movement per se than of meaning, for what distinguishes dance movement from non-dance movements is the fact that they have dance meanings attached to them. But here is a paradox, fundamental to the whole question of dance, because what source can these dance meanings possibly have except the patterned contrasts, the intentional clues, embodied in everyday, nondance movement?[41]

Dance travels from non-dance only to return to it, by symbolic transformation: 'style' is what separates the dance from the non-dance world, and 'meaning' is that which refers back to the non-dance world. As Gell writes: 'what we value in the

[40] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 446; p. 448.
[41] Alfred Gell 'Style and Meaning in Umeda Dance' in *Society and the Dance, The social anthropology of process and performance*, ed. by Paul Spencer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 183-205 (pp. 190-191). I am grateful to Joe Moshenska for recommending this essay to me.

dance is not the surface motor behaviour, or the underlying schema which give it meaning, but the gap that separates the two'.[42] Gell's understanding of the interdependent aspects of style and meaning, and the equally mutually elusive dialogue between them, is a suggestive model for both the rhythms and patterns of verse and also for the choreography of Beckett's late plays. In the one-page play *Come and Go*, for instance, an interlinking pattern is made by the three entrances and exits of the three figures, and the three whispers passing between them. This work contains materials more expansive plays sometimes possess: the evocation of interlaced plots, conjured here by exits and entrances and whispering about someone when they are not on stage; the unities of time and place, in this instance adhered to so strictly the rule seems to combust into a Shakespearean absurdity. *Come and Go* ends:

> May we not speak of the old days? [*Silence.*] Of what came after? [*Silence.*] Shall we hold hands in the old way?
> [*After a moment they join hands as follows*: VI's *right hand with* RU's *right hand.* VI's *left hand with* FLO's *left hand*, FLO's *right hand with* RU's *left hand*, VI's *arms being above* RU's *left arm and* FLO's *right arm. The three pairs of clasped hands rest on the three laps. Silence.*]
> FLO: I can feel the rings.
> [*Silence.*][43]

Being told that they may hold hands 'in the old way' could prompt us to imagine how we might remember what has not yet occurred – for '*a moment*' 'the old way' tangles their ways with ours, as shards of childhood games come and go in the playing area. 'I can feel the rings' could refer to the physical rings they have made on stage, or the circular patterns made by their voices and exits, or the previous three 'Oh's' mysterious circular exclamations, each 'three very different sounds' (as we are told in the notes). The circles made on stage may be imprisoning cycles in which these figures are trapped against their will, or they could be patterns lovingly and wilfully made. 'I can feel the rings', is at once intimate with several actions that have taken place on stage, and yet so intimately self-descriptive of those actions

[42] Gell, p. 204.
[43] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 355.

that the phrase also soars away from the materials it seems to describe and out of which it appears to be made. A startling amplitude issues from the small phrase, as it appears to be back-lit with a chimerical depth. This double exposure is magnified further if we read Beckett's notes: 'Hands made up to be as visible as possible. No rings apparent.' The trinity of rhyming utterances and actions is, in one way, a highly stylised 'dance movement'; under this aspect the script of *Come and Go* is a distillation of scriptedness, the dramaticule is the fragrance of dramatic ritual, as a scent might vividly conjure the warmth of fig wood, its milky sap and fresh leaves, without being a fig tree. What distinguishes dance from non-dance movement, as Gell writes, are 'dance meanings', such meanings as surround the instructions '*Exit*' or '*Silence*', for instance, as contrasted to being silent or leaving a room. Yet here the paradox he writes of makes itself felt, for while a dance movement is distinguished from 'non-dance' by the 'dance meanings' attached to such movements, the sources of such actions, and so their very power and their meaning, are the materials against which such movements are defined. Perhaps we can understand the gap that Gell writes of, a 'threshold however impalpable when the body begins to dance', as an uncertainty in which the lyric loves to dwell.

Stage directions occupy aspects of the temporal qualities sometimes ascribed to lyric as a genre because such instructions both embody an action and disembody the tense of that action by seeming to be both now, what has been, and what will be. '[*After a moment they join hands as follows*'] is both a promissory moment in the future to follow and a prelude followed by what will have already been. Trying to pin down when, say, '[*Silence*]' happens takes you to the bewildering time zone of Krapp's den, *A late evening in the future*. How such unuttered utterances perform upon their performers finds one articulation in *Rockaby*, where we encounter 'w' seated in her rocker, a chair with 'rounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace'. *Rockaby* tasks its performer with not performing: most of the play is spoken, or has been spoken, by her recorded voice, and her rock, 'slight' and 'slow' is 'controlled mechanically without assistance from w.' Beckett's instructions that w should be 'prematurely old' and wear 'incongruous flimsy-head dress set askew with extravagant trimming to catch light when rocking' are meticulously ridiculous, a macabre Woman in Black. Beckett courts these tawdry materials rather as

Wordsworth does in *The Thorn*, reworking *The Cruel Mother* ballads. Rockaby is a lyrical ballad in the sense that it foregrounds the aura of *déjà vu* that can surround ballad: 'the story sung here has been sung before' (in *Rockaby*'s case literally so through recording). The stipulation that w should be 'prematurely old' is both an instruction and an instructive joke, like many aspects of Beckett's scripts, as any attempt to represent premature age gestures to both the perplexities of beings in time and the strange temporal figments that are creatures in works of art while also being a nice challenge for make-up artists.[44] 'Prematurely old' sounds both too early and too late. The blend of birth and death in this phrase might be executed in performance by drawing attention to theatrical make-up, as if w were half dressed up as an old person, with flour in her hair and cracked make-up, a young creature trapped in an old part. *Rockaby* turns on the pains and pleasures of repetition as imagined by Wordsworth's note to *The Thorn* and that poem itself, where Martha's Ray's lament is mediated by having been recorded by the story-teller and transmitted to his captive auditor. As her cry '"Oh misery! oh misery"' passes through the storyteller's voice and echoes in the poem, the phrase seems to be both a 'thing active and efficient', as intimate as a baby's pet-name perhaps, and, at the same time, a worn-out refrain caught in a sad mechanic exercise, like the movements made by the mechanical rocking chair, where an 'expressionless face' sways in and out of light, a spectral auditor of her own voice repeating 'facing other windows' until the face of the word 'expressionless' appears, 'never mind a face / behind the pane'.

Imagine *Rockaby* performed with the w in the chair speaking the words live, and rocking the chair herself. The pitfalls of melodrama gently courted by this work would become chasms. This thought experiment shows that *Rockaby*'s meter, as it were, is its stage craft, a chair moved mechanically without assistance from w, yet wholly dependant on w to be an immobile but living force. *Rockaby*'s recorded repetitions, close to the breath units of *what is the word*, are words for which w asks for 'more', like a baby asking for food perhaps, except here the child seems to be dressed up as her own mother, as if the work is parenting itself, 'another like

[44] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 433.

herself | another creature like herself'. Forms of pain and desire are mingled, as 'more' may be imagined as both a baby's plea and a lover pleading to be spanked. 'More' words coming in pre-recorded time are (in Wordsworth's phrase), that which 'feeds' and that which 'dissolves', nourishment and counter-spirit. From the beginning it was '*time she stopped*'. These words she speaks are in intimate estrangement from the tape, though 'rock' and 'voice' co-exist 'together' in a live and life-long dance that sets in motion all that has already been in time before. *Rockaby* performs its living death on a disassociation between 'I' and 'She' and the strange lullaby made between them, a narrative past that is summoned into the present. The play ends:

> and rocked
> rocked
> saying to herself
> no
> done with that
> the rocker
> those arms at last
> saying to the rocker
> rock her off
> stop her eyes
> fuck life
> stop her eyes
> rock her off
> rock her off
> [*Together; echo of 'rock her off', coming to rest of rock, slow fade out*][45]

The sudden appearance of 'fuck life' is a surprise in the vicinity of this prematurely old person in her rocking chair; at the same time, it's the very thing this mother rocker prepares us for. 'Fuck life' at once disrupts the surrounding materials and issues from them deeply. The expletive takes on the countenance of the 'prematurely old', the outburst of an angry child subdued to diminuendo and costumed in worn-out lace, the beginnings of life erupting at its end, as fuck life, after all, may be an expression giving up on life or one strangely intimate with the

[45] *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 442.

scene where life began. Suddenly the grubby phrase, and all the wastes of time and living it may imply, begins to take on a curious gleam; here misery is flecked with gentleness, and 'catches light when rocking'. A fleeting plenitude appears at the end of this world, *Ripeness is all.* But absorbed again: time she stopped, '*coming to rest of rock, slow fade out*'. In this respect, Beckett's *Rockaby* and Wordsworth's *The Thorn* are companions, as both works are intensely devoted to the perils and pleasures residing inside the rituals of lyricism. Their deeply epitaphic works are poems creating the 'craving' for 'more' and enduring the knowledge that such satiation will be forever elusive. The baby and her mother clasped by these creations are bodies for understanding poetic making as unconditional; in each the work of mourning and love's work meet with 'rounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace'.

One of the risks and pleasures of understanding lyric as a mode able to possess instances of poetic writing thought to lie outside of lyric as a genre is that one creation might be read through another, a practice which need not be seen as alien to a of theory lyric, but nevertheless resistant to the notion that a practice depends on a theory or is embedded in a set of concepts more generally expressible than those expressed in the writing, whether the writing recognises it or not. I've suggested we can imagine Beckett's late short plays as prisms of and for lyric; they might also be described as essays in lyric. This expression seems destined to flatten the serious playfulness of these creations if we take 'essay' as exposition of an argument, or as providing a commentary on lyrical drama, or as a set of instructions for making lyrical plays. Rather, as projections for performance the scripts of Beckett's late plays are essays in lyric in that they attempt, endeavour, rehearse, practise and draft such materials as also concern the study of lyric poems: patterns and the troubling of patterns; the edges between words and song; palpably disembodied voice, breath, silence, timing, dissolving, fading, repeating (and on). A critical essay might, say, explore voice in lyric poems, or draw suggestive analogies with lyric poetry and demonic possession, or with ventriloquism, or child's play; or an essay may try to scan metrical patterns or make an attempt to describe the contours of rhythms. Beckett's late plays are prismatic of lyric in a quite different way because they are propositions tasking the human performer: measure and

rhythm are steps imagined for feet or rockings felt in time, vocal dispossession is conceived as endured by a living being. A script is possessed of a multiple life in its potential realisations, phantom possibilities which may be imagined as yearned for companions or as futile human wishes. The longing figured for 'another like herself | another creature like herself' in *Rockaby* depicts the supplicatory desire felt inside works of art for company. Beckett's late works are essays on and for these questions in that they try them, both with the tentativeness of an experiment and the severity of a trial. Under this aspect, the best criticism of any work may be its performance.