

Romanticism and Time

Literary Temporalities

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9. Heaps of Time in Beckett and Shelley

Laura Quinney

Shelley is famous for his “speed”—conceptual precision, figurative economy, and poetics of momentum—and this speed is nowhere more evident or powerful than in his last poem, The Triumph of Life. In that poem, speed is also a thematic issue: the rapidity with which the Chariot of Life hurtles forward on its destructive course figures the overwhelming momentum of time, which leaves human agency in the dust. Beckett’s rhythms and his treatment of time would seem on the face of it to be inverse. Characters such as Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot seem to have all too much time on their hands. Many characters in Beckett, from Belacqua through the Unnameable, Winnie, and beyond, seem to occupy a purgatorial temporality in which nothing more can take place. These characters find themselves out of synch with time. And yet they are no more immune to time than Shelley’s ‘great stream / Of people ... hurrying to & fro’. It’s because of the nature of time that they are confronted with this cognitive bafflement: they don’t know what is happening to them, any more than Winnie or the tramps do. The Augustinian problematic by which the past and future ‘had been, and would be not’ offers a counter-romantic view of time, not as a theater of absolute loss compensated for by sublime gain (as in Mont Blanc) but as a final loss of one’s footing, as the difference between speed and vacancy (Shelley and Beckett) becomes undone.

Shelley is famous for his ‘speed’—conceptual precision, figurative economy, and poetics of momentum—and this speed is nowhere more evident or powerful than in his last poem, *The Triumph of Life*.¹ In that

1 See the chapter entitled ‘Shelley’s Speed’, in William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984), pp. 154–83.

poem, speed also appears as a thematic issue (not for the first time in Shelley): the rapidity with which the Chariot of Life hurtles forward on its destructive course figures the overwhelming momentum of time, which leaves human agency in the dust. Beckett's rhythms and his treatment of time would seem on the face of it to be inverse. Many characters in Beckett, from Belacqua through the Unnameable, Winnie, and beyond, occupy an inertial temporality in which time appears to have slowed to a halt. Nothing more can take place, it appears, though they live on and on. And yet they are no more immune to the effects of time than Shelley's

great stream

Of people ... hurrying to & fro

Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,

All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know

Whither he went, or whence he came, or why

He made one of the multitude...²

Shelley's anonymous crowds do not know what is happening to them, any more than Winnie or the tramps do. The nature of time has pitched them into this cognitive bafflement, and they dwell in a purgatorial haze. (Not coincidentally, both Beckett and Shelley take Dante's *Purgatorio* as a major source of inspiration.³) For *The Triumph of Life* offers a counter-Romantic view of time. Time in this poem is not the theatre of absolute loss compensated by sublime gain, as it is in 'Tintern Abbey' or *Mont Blanc*, but the cause of psychological entropy and self-loss of

2 Percy Shelley, 'The Triumph of Life', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 485, lines 44–49.

3 For Shelley, Dante and *The Triumph of Life*, see Anita O'Connell, 'Dante's Linguistic Detail in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1683> and Peter Vassalo, 'From Petrarch to Dante: The Discourse of Disenchantment in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*,' *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 1 (1991), 102–10. For Beckett and Dante, see Danielle Castelli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719071560.001.0001>

the same kind Beckett obsessively depicts in his plays and novels. Thus the difference between speed and vacancy is undone, revealing an affinity between Beckett and Shelley which might come as a surprise to conventional literary history.

The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett flatly declares that in Beckett "Shelley" is an 'English poet drawn on when a romantic cliché is needed'.⁴ One such 'romantic cliché', evidently, is 'pale for weariness,' as quoted by Estragon and cited in relation to Belacqua, Dante's emblem of laziness, whom Beckett summons a number of times. Beckett draws the line from Shelley's fragment, 'To the Moon':

To the Moon

I

Art thou pale for weariness

Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,

Wandering companionless

Among the stars that have a different birth,—

And ever changing, like a joyless eye

That finds no object worth its constancy?⁵

If this fragment exemplifies Romantic cliché, it is not of the prettifying sort. Shelley's anthropomorphised moon is an exile, 'Wandering companionless/Among the stars that have a different birth'. It is alienated and aimless, seeking but unable to find a credible passion, 'like a joyless eye/That finds no object worth its constancy.' It is easy enough to see that Beckett's attitude towards this poem cannot be merely satirical, as the *Grove Companion* suggests. Beckett's relation to lyricism is itself equivocal—he is by no means beyond his own lyrical flights—but it is the thematic bite in this Shelley fragment that, I believe, drew

4 C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, eds, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life and Thought* (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 1663.

5 Percy Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 146.

him to it. Estragon amends the quotation to add that the moon is weary specifically 'Of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us',⁶ but that sentiment of existential disgust is not so far from the spirit of Shelley's poem. 'Weariness' is a temporal effect: the two authors (at times) portray time as performing the same malicious operation, consuming us while we try to discover a suitable employment for it, drawing agency and identity into a losing game of catch-up.

It is necessary to go back into the earlier history of Romanticism in order to understand how Shelley's thought and his temporal figures evolved. The challenge temporality poses to agency and identity had already been broached, in a sophisticated way, by Wordsworth and Coleridge. As developed earlier in the eighteenth century, the 'poem of revisitation' portrays the return of the adult to a place familiar in childhood, and usually explores the melancholy awareness of time passing, and of the dramatic difference between the child and the adult self. Wordsworth and Coleridge adapted this model in poems where the catalyst of self-recognition, the forms of self-division, and the stakes involved, are both more dramatic and more subtle. In 'Tintern Abbey,' 'Frost at Midnight,' 'Dejection,' 'the Intimations Ode' and others, the self engages in a fraught dialogue with itself, wherein its perception of its own changes induces larger existential anxieties. Against my will, the speaker implies, time has parted me from myself. (Anyone who has read Proust will recognise this as one of his great themes.) Involuntary changes in the self are symptoms of its passivity, changes wrought upon it by its existence in time, which it resists in vain. The 'I' experiences itself as frustratingly labile and tenuous. It cannot keep up with its own experience, finding itself unable to grasp events or achieve self-knowledge. Yet it cannot dissolve self-consciousness; it remains to wrestle with itself. (The similarity to Beckett's 'brain in a vat' fictions is instantly recognizable.)

Let us take 'Frost at Midnight' as an example: consciousness, when it becomes self-conscious, has no choice but to 'idle', spinning its wheels without engaging the reality from which it stands apart.⁷ In

6 Samuel Beckett, *The Collected Works of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove, 1970), p. 34.

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 120.

the second verse paragraph (as traditionally printed), idling takes the form of reverie, nostalgia, of remembering the dreams of the helpless child. Confinement is the theme, and the speaker does what one does in confinement: he *temporises*. To 'temporise' means 'to let time pass, spend time, 'mark time'' (OED), and then 'to delay' or 'to procrastinate.' The latter terms have a moral nuance; they imply that one ought to be doing something else. However, in Coleridge's poem the thinker has nothing to do but think and dream. Therein lies the important idea behind this sense of the word 'temporise': to idle—to let time pass not inactively, but without effect—is also to 'mark time,' to index the passage of time in the form of one's own passing thoughts or aimless activities. As the imprisoned Richard II laments, 'I have wasted time; and now doth time waste me, for now hath Time made me his numbering clock'.⁸ Probably recalling this passage from Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson reworked the metaphor in one of his piquant moral essays on the subject of procrastination (*Idler* #18). Titled 'Disguises of Idleness,' he portrays himself and his strategies of delay in the person of one 'Sober,' whom he encourages to reform. (We are discussing Coleridge and Shelley at this point, but it is worth remarking that Samuel Johnson was a favourite with Beckett, and a passage like the following makes it clear why.)

His daily amusement is chymistry. He has a small furnace, which he employs in distillation, and which has long been the solace of his life. He draws oils and waters, and essences and spirits, which he knows to be of no use; sits and counts the drops, as they come from his retort, and forgets that, whilst a drop is falling, a moment flies away.⁹

Time moves forward whether or not we 'seize' it. To idle is to tick off the moments blindly, to become oneself a register of the flying moments, without knowing it. Thus one's passivity in relation to time is compounded. For time does not in fact pass emptily. When the mind idles, it feels itself to be outside of time, but with every thought a moment passes in which external and internal changes are taking place, insensibly.

8 William Shakespeare, 'Richard II', Act V Scene v, 49–50, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2008).

9 Samuel Johnson, *Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer and Idler*, ed. by Walter Jackson Bate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 293.

Shelley takes up the theme—time’s ruination of agency—and gives it an epic treatment in *The Triumph of Life*. The Chariot of Life, a figure for time, moves so rapidly that it sweeps up, or crushes, or outstrips its individual followers. Shelley emphasises its role in defeating human purposes by singling out the eminent benefactors or would-be benefactors of humanity—Aristotle, Plato, Bacon, the Enlightened despots, Napoleon—all compromised, the poems says, in the spirit or in their legacies. There, chained to the Car, like leaders of defeated peoples in a Roman Triumph, languish

‘The Wise,

‘The great, the unforgotten: they who wore

Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreathes of light,

Signs of thought’s empire over thought; their lore

‘Taught them not this—to know themselves; their might

Could not repress the mutiny within,

And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night

‘Caught them ere evening’.¹⁰

This passage crackles with subtle thought, challenging the reader to understand how the great ones failed to fulfil the Delphic command, ‘know thyself,’ how they were undone by a ‘mutiny within,’ and how they were benighted, doused by an oblivion that mocked their self-conceptions. What we can discern unequivocally is that their failure was both cognitive and moral, that it was consequential and that it is figured in terms of temporal asynchrony: they were belated in relation to themselves.

The poem’s most significant representative of defeated purposes is, of course, Rousseau, who has ‘fallen by the wayside’ in a decayed form

10 *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 489–90, lines 208–15.

the narrator at first mistakes for 'an old root' with grass for hair and holes for eyes. Rousseau says 'I/Am weary' and the narrator observes that he pauses 'wearily,' 'like one who by the weight/Of his own words, is staggered.'¹¹ When he comes to tell his story, he opens with a declaration of his bafflement:

'Whence I came, partly I seem to know,

'And how and by what paths I have been brought

To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;

Why this should be my mind can compass not—

'Whither the conqueror hurries me still less.'¹²

He reprises this confession of mental haze more dramatically in describing the effect of drinking the *Nepenthe* proffered by the seductive 'shape all light': 'And suddenly my brain became as sand', on which impressions are scored and erased and scored again in endless succession.¹³ These moments contribute to the theme of how time damages or defeats human purposes, specifically, by damaging or defeating human understanding. Time eludes cognition—it resists our understanding—but more importantly, it continually erodes, scrambles and erases knowledge. Agency and identity can hardly be maintained under these circumstances. The medium of time, through which we move, promotes cognitive disruption and hence, discontinuity within the self. (*Contra* Locke, who defined personal identity as present consciousness and its attendant memories). The mind can't keep up. It is always trying and failing to master what time has already brought forth, and is already moving to supersede, or has already superseded. According to Rousseau, the 'spark' within him fights a losing battle with the 'corruption' steadily encroaching upon it.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 489, lines 195–96 and 196–97.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 493, lines 300–04.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 496, line 405.

'And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
Earth had with purer nutriment supplied

'Corruption would not now thus much inherit
Of what was once Rousseau—nor this disguise
Stain that within which still disdains to wear it.—¹⁴

An erosion of this kind, a loss of oneself through and in time, is implicit in the Platonic paradigm of the Intimations Ode. Harold Bloom some time ago noted the ubiquitous presence of Wordsworth in *The Triumph of Life*, though he reads Shelley's 'shape all light' as a 'sublimating metaphor for everything that Wordsworth called nature' while I take it to be a descendent not of nature, but its opposite, the transcendental 'gleam' or 'celestial light' of the Intimations Ode. After its first radiant appearance, it similarly 'fade[s] into the light of common day'.¹⁵ By attributing this disappointing end to the 'shape all light,' Shelley critiques the evasiveness of Wordsworth's accommodation. Wordsworth brings himself to admit that 'Nature,' extended in sense to cover our life on earth, is a 'homely nurse,' who 'doth all she can to make her child, her inmate Man, forget the glories he hath known,' yet he goes on to claim that memories of childhood 'recollections' of the other world persist and sustain the adult, so that 'our souls' continue to 'have sight of that immortal sea/Can in a moment travel thither,/And see the children sport upon the shore,/And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore'.¹⁶ In Shelley's view, Wordsworth is skirting the implications of his own Platonic paradigm, neglecting the powerful encroachment of 'corruption': in fact, our souls *cannot* keep sight of that immortal sea, memories disintegrate and former selves vanish—the brain becomes as sand. Wordsworth's 'celestial light,' transformed into the 'shape all light,' becomes destructive itself, in Shelley's reckoning, as if to suggest

14 Ibid., p. 489, lines 201–05.

15 Harold Bloom, 'Shelley and His Precursors', in *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 107, and William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2014), p. 436, lines 4 and 77.

16 *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, p. 436, lines 168–72.

that there is no escaping degradation. Even the otherworldly ideal of the intelligible world distracts and damages the imagination:

‘And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

‘All that was seemed as if it had been not—
As if the gazer’s mind was strewn beneath
Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

‘Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
As Day upon the threshold of the east
Treads out the lamps of night [...].¹⁷

The ‘shape all light’ works its depredations in a particularly insidious way, entrancing the spectator—worshipper, rather—with a musical motion that erases thought as it goes, emptying memory and so negating history, until ‘All that was seemed as if it had been not.’ This process of obliteration is likened to an oddly authoritarian sunrise.

The Triumph of Life epitomizes the challenge to agency and cognition in repeated figures of temporal discrepancy. These are instances of what we might call ‘non-synchronous temporality’, occasions on which two things that should run parallel have become out of sync, that is to say, they have progressed asymmetrically. We saw an example in the fate of the ‘Wise, the great, the unforgotten’ overtaken in the daytime by ‘deep night.’ But even progressions that are natural and gradual in nature, such as sunrise—as above—and sunset are represented as violent and untimely usurpations. One kind of time is in the vanguard and another, usually where the human principle is located, has fallen behind it, becoming anachronistic—‘backward in time’, etymologically, or according to the dictionary definition, ‘belonging or appropriate to a

¹⁷ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 495, lines 382–88.

period other than that in which it exists'.¹⁸ The Chariot that outspeeds its followers, leaving them 'farther behind and deeper in the shade', is the chief of these figures, and we have noted others. The Coleridgean theme of death-in-life—survival beyond one's powers or emotional capacity—is common, along with varied images of anachronistic 'lingering', including that of the 'shape all light', which lingers into noon, 'More dimly than a day appearing dream,/The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep'.¹⁹ There is a general failure of temporal economy, economy of the sort implied in the concept of linear time, which underlies ideas of development and maturation, as well as the model of loss and gain, in which one thing arises after the other in a proper order.²⁰ Shelley's virtuoso treatment of the terza rima form contributes to the effect of momentum and danger, as he splays long sinuous sentences, sustained by dramatic subordinate clauses, across the tercets that drive forward in anticipation of the next interlocking rhyme. The reader finds it hard to keep up with the sense, especially given the pull of the extraordinary music. So skilled and incisive is the verse that we need not actually lose the sense, but the experience of reading the poem is nonetheless likely to be vertiginous.

18 *Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/language-and-linguistics/anachronism>

19 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 496, lines 427–28.

20 In 'Shelley Disfigured', Paul de Man, who uncovers major elements of this pattern, reads it as an allegory of the destructive effects of figuration, or 'the madness of words', on human cognition. The interpretation offered here is a more traditional thematic one—it is time that works the erosion—though this interpretation is not inconsistent with de Man's view of 'history.' Paul de Man, 'Shelley Disfigured', in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), p. 68. For important reconsiderations of the poem in light of de Man's essay, see (in chronological order), Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501723148>; Orrin N. C. Wang, 'Disfiguring Monuments: History in Paul de Man's *Shelley Disfigured* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*', *ELH*, vol. 58, 1991, 633–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873459>; and Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226458588.001.0001>. For the very latest, see the issue of *Romantic Circles* devoted to essays on *The Triumph of Life*: 'The Futures of Shelley's *Triumph*', ed. by Joel Faflak, *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, October 2019, <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/triumph>.

If Shelley's characteristic figures of temporality involve the swift and overwhelming, Beckett's seem to involve the opposite: a fugal retardation. In the Beckett works that focus on the experience of temporality—*Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*—the characters suffer from tedium and impatience. They feel they have all too much time on their hands. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* provide the classic example. Impatiently, they 'idle.' They can only 'pass the time' until it finally brings forth whatever it is that, they assume, it is heading toward, though they are haunted, too, by the possibility that time is empty and headed nowhere. Unlike Shelley's 'captives,' they wait for time to catch up with them, rather than the reverse. Yet these works share a number of themes and figurative patterns with Shelley's. *Waiting for Godot* is riddled with temporal discrepancies which prove confusing not only to the audience, but to the characters themselves. Vladimir tries to find his footing in time (and presses Estragon to do so)—unsuccessfully: what do I remember? are my memories accurate? were we here yesterday? how many years have we been together? These questions about temporality are naturally linked to questions of the identity of things, persons, oneself: have we seen Lucky and Pozzo before? Are these the same boots? Is this the same place? Is this the same boy who was here yesterday? Why doesn't he recognise me and confirm my identity? Am I the same person? Temporality is measured by returns, and *Waiting for Godot* courts vertigo by rendering the returns uncertain and/or temporally illogical. Even natural temporality is dislocated, as in *The Triumph of Life*. The tree seems to bloom precipitately, overnight. Pozzo's bizarre claim that night comes 'when you least expect it' is confirmed by the stage direction at the end of Act I: 'The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night'.²¹ This is Shelley's precipitate sunrise in reverse.

The theme of temporal disorientation and passivation by time reaches its climax at the end of Act II, when a devastated Pozzo and an increasingly anxious Vladimir express their disillusionment and weariness in the play's chief figure of temporal discrepancy: birth 'astride a grave'.²² Pozzo was jauntily mindful of clock time in Act I,

21 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove, 1970), pp. 25 and 34.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 57 and 58.

where he kept taking out his pocket watch and noting the hour, before losing his watch altogether. Now he bursts out:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.²³

Vladimir echoes him in the last moments of the play, as he allows his despair to surface fully: 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries'.²⁴ The sentiment hearkens back to Hamlet's aphorism: 'A man's life's but to say "one"'.²⁵ In objective terms, a human life takes only an instant. But the more important point concerns subjective temporality: even to human beings, who may have found it 'lingeringly' tedious to go through, when it's past, a life snaps shut like a folding fan. This is the chief riddle of *Waiting for Godot*: how the 'waiting' (waiting like Chekhov's characters, for life to begin) seems long and weary in experience, but dream-like and insubstantial in retrospect. As the Kafka parable goes, 'My grandfather used to say: "Life is astoundingly short. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that—not to mention accidents—even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey"'.²⁶

Vladimir's complaint against time is paired with his apprehension of loss in agency and knowledge. As he regards Estragon napping, he muses: 'At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on'.²⁷ And of course it is true: we the audience are gazing on him as on a benighted naïf, as someone above might presumably gaze on us. Everyone is asleep in

23 Ibid., p. 57.

24 Ibid., p. 58.

25 'Hamlet', Act V Scene, ii, l. 71, in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

26 Franz Kafka, 'The Next Village', in *The Basic Kafka*, ed. by Eric Heller (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 148.

27 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 58.

time. Everyone is blind in relation to it—as, to borrow W.S. Merwin’s words from the poem ‘Still Morning,’ ‘the flying birds know/nothing of the air they are flying through/or of the day that bears them up through themselves’—unable to rise above the medium of time so as to move through it, to ‘grasp’ it, as a higher being or transcendental audience might.²⁸ In Lucky’s speech, human beings are waiting ‘for time to tell’, which assuredly it cannot do, being incapable of speech, why we live in it as we do, why ‘man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines’ and ‘in spite of the strides of physical culture the practice of sports’ etc. ‘fades away’.²⁹

At the end of the speech I’ve quoted, Vladimir adds, ‘But habit is a great deadener’.³⁰ Beckett might be thinking here of the lament in the *Intimations Ode*: ‘custom shall lie upon thee with a weight/Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.’ Vladimir’s generalization has two meanings: habit ‘deadens’ existential anxiety, and the awareness of mortality, but also—this is related—habit ‘deadens’ us to the passage of time. Hence we ‘temporise,’ or ‘mark time’, as if we had all the time in the world. The illusion, or contradiction, is captured in this riddling exchange:

Vladimir. Well, that passed the time.

Estragon. It would have passed anyway.³¹

There is our passing time and there is time passing of itself. We exert our agency, we ‘pass time’—that is, distract ourselves when we’re threatened with boredom, as we wait for time to bring forth what we’re waiting for. But it is ticking away. From its point of view, nothing is different and it is elapsing in its usual regular, inexorable increments. The telos, the endpoint we project as the aim of our time, is no affair of time itself.

The framework of the telos—of anticipating a goal—disappears altogether in *Happy Days*. The play could be said to strip down the mise-en-scene of *Waiting for Godot*, subjecting its temporal insights to a more radical treatment. The natural cycles of time no longer occur—there is steady light with no sunrise, no sunset. When Winnie refers to ‘days’

28 W.S. Merwin, *The Collected Poems: 1996–2011*, ed. by J.D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2013), p. 544.

29 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 29.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

or 'nights', she catches herself and, sighing nostalgically, admits she is speaking in 'the old style'.³² She has no means of keeping time during the 'day'—no timepiece or natural measures—and therefore doesn't know where she is in the new artificial day, that is, the interval between the bell that summons her to awake and the bell that directs her to sleep. The living of life to some larger and long-term purpose seems to be over. She does not and cannot pursue any such goal, but she does have an aim, the immediate end of 'passing the time'—and perhaps provoking Willie to speak. She imposes various routines upon herself to structure the 'day'—grooming, mainly—but her chief pastime is talking.

And yet in the midst of this emptiness, something is happening: the mound of sand—plainly enough 'the sands of time'—which buries her up to her waist in Act I, rises all the way up to her neck in Act II. Now she is paralyzed and can no longer perform any diverting physical rituals, though she exults in being able to cross her eyes and sight the tip of her nose. Ever-sunny, ever seeking a balm for her terror, she affirms the little things that make these 'happy days'. But her underlying panic becomes harder to subdue and she finally expresses it, though under the camouflage of telling a story, in an insistent scream. For she has been chattering not simply to pass the time—to amuse herself, idly—but to subdue a gnawing anxiety about time. She gives herself odd instructions not to put up the umbrella 'too soon,' and not to sing 'too soon' and not to 'squander all [her] words for the day', as if there were some limit on these activities, in her empty stretch between the bells.³³

This is one of the modes of temporal discrepancy in *Happy Days*: Winnie's fear of surviving into a time that somehow hangs in its full weight upon consciousness, and cannot *be passed*, her fear, as she puts it 'so great, certain days, of finding oneself...left, with hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, nothing more to do'.³⁴ She speaks of this prospect as the dread moment 'when words must fail', and the mind enter the great silence in which self-consciousness confronts its subordination to time.³⁵ Winnie is terrified that Willie will

32 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 22 *et passim*.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 41.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

'go off'—abandon her or die and then she will have no audience.³⁶ As it is, she says, she is able to reassure herself, 'Something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do'.³⁷ Warding off the psychological peril, Estragon assures Vladimir, 'We always find something, don't we, Didi, to give us the impression we exist?'³⁸ Like Vladimir, Winnie needs to be recognised, to be heard, by another person in order to confirm her own existence and identity. The silence in which only the passage of time can be heard has the opposite effect, causing the self to question its own substantiality.

It does so, in large part, because of the passage of time, or rather the transmutation and ellipsis of itself in time: its changes, losses and lapses of memory. This process and its consequences are distilled in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). Recorded diaries of earlier years force Krapp to recognise the yawning distance between his present and his past selves: 'Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp,' he marvels.³⁹ The distance enables him to perceive now that he was pompously self-deluded and that he cast love away. Yet, though he mocks it in himself, he feels a secret nostalgia for his youth, with its 'aspirations' and its 'resolutions'⁴⁰: 'Be again, be again... (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn't enough for you.'⁴¹ Time passes differently in the life of an old man: 'What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool.'⁴² Not only is his sphere of action contracted, but Krapp senses he has been internally residualised: there is very little left of him in his own consciousness – wit, a vital memory, an emotion or two. The spare setting—a table with a light above it, surrounded by darkness—figures this contraction for us. Krapp himself sees it as, paradoxically, an elaboration of his constricting solitude: 'With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. (*Pause.*) In a way. (*Pause.*) I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to... (*hesitates*)...me.'⁴³ The hesitation is telling: what is this 'me' he is left with now?

36 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

38 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 45.

39 Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), p. 58.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Like Krapp, Winnie is haunted by signal memories of love, by which she measures the distance between then and now, but she reflects more deliberately on the philosophical problems posed by temporality. One of the chief problems she confronts is how to explain the changes occurring in her seemingly changeless world. Even her possessions, when damaged, are magically replaced. Her parasol explodes into flames, but, Winnie comments, 'Yes, something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at all...The sunshade will be there again tomorrow, beside me on this mount, to help me through the day'.⁴⁴ This assumption is confirmed by the stage directions at the opening of Act II, which stipulate 'Bag and parasol as before.'⁴⁵ Winnie takes this persistence of objects as a cause for despair. She comes close to tears in praising it: 'No, one can do nothing. (*Pause.*) That is what I find so wonderful, the way things...(*voice breaks, head down*)...things...so wonderful.'⁴⁶

She experiences frustration with the supernatural identity of objects in her world because she contrasts their indestructibility with her own steady deterioration. As the heap of sand rises, as time advances, it diminishes her. Though there are no clocks in her world, the mound of sand makes a living hourglass of her. She cheerfully protests, on occasion, when she is examining her body 'no better, no worse—no change,'⁴⁷ but she clearly recognises losses in herself—including her loss of mobility—and she dreads further losses, internal failures of memory and reason: 'I have not lost my reason. (*Pause.*) Not yet. (*Pause.*) Not all. (*Pause.*) Some remains. (*Pause.*) Like little...sunderings, little falls... apart.'⁴⁸ In fact, she notes even the perfect mind cannot be trusted to retain the memory, and consequently, the history, of past experience, and to forget it is to expunge it: 'should one day the earth cover my breasts then I shall never have seen my breasts.'⁴⁹ As Augustine pointed out, only the present is real, and a memory of the past is only real in the present. If the memory is faulty or is lost, then it is as if what has been had never been, or in Shelley's words, 'All that was seem[s] as if it had

44 Beckett, *Happy Days*, p. 39.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

been not.' The mind as it moves through time is erasing life. When the parasol spontaneously combusts, Winnie remarks, 'I presume this has occurred before, though I cannot recall it.'⁵⁰

The continuity of the self is at stake. The sadder Winnie of Act II observes the challenge that time poses to identity, again *contra* Locke, juxtaposing memory and present consciousness in such a way as to promote a sense not of continuity but its reverse, disjunction: 'Then... now... what difficulties here for the mind. (*Pause.*) To have been always what I am—and so changed from what I was. (*Pause.*) I am the one, I say the one, then the other. (*Pause.*). Now the one, then the other.'⁵¹ (Her sense of alteration becomes so vertiginous that (comically) she thinks 'gravity' and other 'natural laws' are 'not what they were when I was young... and foolish.'⁵² She goes farther than Krapp by remarking not only on the great gap between selves, but on the treacherous pace of internal change. The change that seems sudden now has taken place incrementally, and so one failed to perceive it happening. Winnie catches herself having been prey to the illusion: 'I used to say there was no difference between one fraction of a second and the next...I say I used to say, Winnie, you are changeless, there is never any difference between one fraction of a second and the next.'⁵³ Behind these lines lies an allusion to the sorites paradox, the philosophical problem of the heap: if sand is added to sand one grain at a time, at what point does the group of sands become a heap? When does the qualitative change take place? Not between one grain and the next. The play's *mise-en-scène*, the enveloping mound, figures not merely the sands of time and their encroachment, but more particularly, the mutation time effects in us, the invisible and stealthy replacement of the self. It is the paradoxical nature of time that it seems to dally while it is, unbeknownst to us, changing us against our will. It paralyzes Winnie under a mound of sand, as it had made a grotesque of Rousseau, inwardly 'corrupted' and outwardly reduced to the semblance of an 'old root'. The perception of change brings with it the perception of passivity, and that is what is most destructive.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Winnie tries to keep her spirits up, with an occasional lapse or near-lapse into sob and scream. But her complaint against time—her protest and her lament—escapes in her literary allusions. She is reluctant to say it in her own words, and she only allows it to surface in half-remembered quotations, even if she does say, ‘That’s what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics, to help one through the day’.⁵⁴ Her allusions serve simultaneously to reveal and distract. Her canon is broadly Romantic (if we include precursors and successors): Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Keats, Browning, Yeats, and so forth. She brokenly refers to ‘Flowers...that smile today’⁵⁵, an allusion to Herrick’s ‘To the Virgins to Make Much of Time’:

Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
 Old Tyme is still a flying,
 and this same flower, that smiles today,
 to Morrow will be dying.⁵⁶

(2013: 171)

This allusion to Herrick takes in another to a poem which itself alludes to Herrick: the poem by Shelley that is sometimes entitled ‘Mutability’:

The flower that smiles to-day
 To-morrow dies;
 All that we wish to stay
 Tempts and then flies.
 What is this world’s delight?
 Lightning that mocks the night⁵⁷

54 Ibid., p. 58.

55 Ibid., p. 61.

56 Robert Herrick, *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. by Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p 171, ll. 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199212842.book.1>, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199212842.book.2>

57 Percy Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 589, ll. 1–6.

Shelley radically alters the rhetorical frame, converting Herrick's seductive call to action into stark lament. He changes the purchase of the metaphor: the brief life of the flower now serves to illustrate a different point—not that all lives are short and one must seize the day, as in Herrick, but that life 'mocks' us with apparitions of value ('all that we wish to stay') it dangles before us and then dissolves. This is the malice we recognise from *The Triumph of Life*. It portends that, like Shelley's moon or his Rousseau, one may conclude with 'a joyless eye/That finds no object worth its constancy.' Winnie's allusion is clearly much closer in spirit to Shelley's revision of Herrick than to the original, and the allusion, as often, is her form of homage. Neither Winnie's *nor* Beckett's attitude toward the poem dismisses it as 'romantic cliché'. It is fixed in Winnie's mind because it says what she feels.

Satisfying as it may be to end where I began, with Beckett quoting Shelley, I hasten to add that I am not making a genealogical argument. It was not necessary for Beckett to have read Shelley for him to have thought about or represented temporality in the way that he does. The similarity might easily be attributed to their shared background in Cartesian and post-Cartesian psychology. I wish to draw a parallel, and more importantly, to demonstrate the sympathy between bodies of work conventionally held to be antithetical. In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley was no more sanguine about human agency and identity than Beckett the iconic postmodernist, for the so-called 'Romantic ideology' only came to be by means of undoing itself.

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