

Beckett

After fifteen years of memorable conversations with Samuel Beckett, I realized that I could not depend on my memory. The unforgettable was becoming irretrievable. It would have broken our friendship had I taken notes in his presence. I wanted to, of course, and, of course, I didn't dare. It was clear from the very first time I met him in 1959, as it was immediately clear to anyone who met him, that this single-minded, intense, erudite, passionate and above all truthful man, beautiful to look at, was inhabited by what used to be called "divine afflatus." I finally started taking notes—and even then not regularly—in 1970, stopped, then started again, from 1974 on, usually just after he'd left our house, or on returning from a restaurant.

Which leaves out all the years and mostly nights spent at the Falstaff, a bar-restaurant on rue du Montparnasse, or at Chez Françoise in the Invalides, La Closerie des Lilas or the Iles Marquises, or at La Coupole, when, before I met Sam, he and Avigdor Arikha, not yet my husband, used sometimes to meet



Samuel Beckett, Anne Atik, and her daughter, Alba at Avigdor Arikha's opening, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, December 8, 1970.

Photograph ©André Morain.

OPPOSITE: Samuel Beckett during his time as a student at Trinity College, Dublin.

Photograph ©The Samuel Beckett Estate.

for lunch as well as drinks. Nights when we'd drunk too much for me to write anything at all (as an American just out of milkshakes and the regulation Chianti); evenings which sometimes lasted till four in the morning, whiskey alternating with wine, capped with a few beers, crowned by champagne.

They drank up and down the Boulevard Montparnasse, Avigdor and Sam—his companion, Suzanne, never joined us—chummily bobbing along in full fettle, Sam assuring Avigdor too solemnly, and too late, as they lurched onwards: "*Wein nach Bier das rat ich dir; Bier nach Wein das rat ich kein*"—

A Memoir by Anne Atik

drawings by AVIGDOR ARIKHA

& Poetry

“wine after beer I can advise, beer after wine would not be wise”—towards the Dôme, where they often ran into Giacometti, myself in a state of near collapse.

No quantity of alcohol, however extravagant, seemed to affect their memory, either for historic dates or for poetry, and the two had gone on in this way since their first conversation in 1956, when Avigdor was twenty-seven years old and Sam fifty—even if the long drinking sessions became shorter and more manageable over the years, and getting up in the morning less of a struggle.

In spite of, or rather along with, those exchanges, there were also entire evenings when Sam didn't say a word. At such times it was not easy to break the silence; it would have been worse than interrupting an avowal. There'd be a murmur, a shift in position, and someone's voice slowly breaking the artefact that silence had become. Even though Sam's was not an aggressive silence directed against anyone, but rather a sinking into his private world with its demons, or so we imagined, those present suppressed their acute discomfort and feelings of ineptitude when it happened. Precisely because no one could so enhance one's sense of being listened to, and people aren't used to being wholly listened to, these moments of chill made one feel personally responsible, even guilty. Eventually we learned not to take it personally. But each time it came over him it was like being in a tunnel with someone dear whose face you suddenly couldn't see. Or who couldn't see you.

His intimate friends learned how to cope with his struggle—A. by talking about a wine he had tasted, the theater designer Jocelyn Herbert by bringing a chessboard. I coped by bringing up Dr. Johnson. Johnson was the one subject most certain to animate Sam, no matter how despondent he'd been before. He dipped into Johnson constantly, for sheer pleasure. He had even written a play about him which he regarded as juvenilia. Johnson's conversation—in spite of his notorious rages—was for Sam the paradigm of civilization and proportion; his kindness and hospitality to the poor and helpless, exemplary.

No one who had anything to do with Sam, even for five minutes, could fail to be struck by his sheer goodness. It came to him as naturally and unselfconsciously as blinking, as swallowing. Which is what made his friends so very protective of him, with a protectiveness considered by onlookers as over-reverential. Even at the very beginning of their friendship, in the fifties, A. remembers Sam turning to him (they were on the platform of the Number 62 bus) and saying, “*Si vous êtes fauché, dites-le moi, car j'en ai maintenant*” (“If you're broke,

tell me, because I have some money now”). He actually didn't have very much then, but some of his books had been selling better than expected. There are innumerable instances of such gestures towards other people; he often caught them by surprise, and they, too, remember him asking, off-handedly, as though it was an afterthought, “Are you all right for money?”



Our greatest evenings were spent as a threesome. At the time I met Sam I had just started learning French, so that the poets whom we recited then—he, mostly, by heart—were mainly English-language (although he and A. would break into French from habit), Yeats above all. As my French improved, they would both recite French poets (many of whom Beckett had translated) and then, feeling less restrained, German, Italian, Spanish, and once A. had told him about Pessoa, Portuguese, which Sam studied in order to read him in the original. But especially German. Since A. also remembered poems in Swedish (by Erik Lindegren) and Spanish (by Neruda, mostly) and both of them knew other Spanish poets, and Sam's Italian was excellent, the liquid and labial, guttural and glottal sounds issuing from the two of them in all these tongues were like the cymbals, horn and brass in an orchestra.

Sam recited a great deal from French poets; the first time he mentioned Vincent Voiture (1598-1648), courteous in the face of my ignorance, he wrote out for me:

*J'ai vécu sans nulle pensément
me laissant aller doucement
à la bonne foi naturelle
et je m'étonne fort pourquoi
la mort pense jamais à moi
qui ne pensait jamais à elle*

I lived unthinkingly
let myself go quietly
in good faith naturally
and very much wonder wherefore
death never thought of me
who never thought of her

There was Rabelais, and Ronsard, whom Sam knew very well; Racine from whom he said he'd learned so much, especially in the use of monologue as a means of revealing character; Flaubert, of course, about whom he would talk passionately, the work and the example; Verlaine, Chamfort's maxims, Rimbaud, Maurice Scève (whose “*Délie*” he gave me), Gérard de Nerval.



To give a transcription of the way he read Apollinaire’s “*La chanson du mal aimé*,” I asked a musician (the harpsichordist Orhan Memed) to help me. It went something like this (see the illustration below):

*Voie lactée ô soeur lumineuse
Des blancs ruisseaux de Chanaan
Et des corps blancs des amoureuses
Nageurs morts suivrons-nous d’ahan
Ton cours vers d’autres nébuleuses*

Milky way oh gleaming sister
From the white streams of Canaan
And from white bodies of lovers
Dead swimmers we’ll press sorely on
Your course towards other nebulae

Reciting informed Sam’s approach to Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays. When he came to the lines from Sonnet 71 (“No longer mourn for me when I am dead”),

Nay, if you read this line remember not
The hand that writ it, for I love you so...

he’d look up, and pause, letting the phrase rise like water in a fountain. The last time he recited it he told us he’d been considering writing a play around this sonnet, but gave up on the project. The lines from Sonnet 116 (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds”),

Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

made him laugh ruefully. “Fixed!” he would recite ironically, like a college student enjoying the enormity, but it would be completely off the mark to ascribe this to anything in his personal life (the way he recited “For I love you so” would disprove that).

He recited from *Macbeth*, remarking on how the power of the consonants created the atmosphere, reciting the entire passage of “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” among others; and from *King Lear*: “Out, vile jelly,” or Lear’s response to Gloucester’s “O! Let me kiss that hand!”—“Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality,” and Edgar’s lines, especially “The worst is not; So long as we can say. ‘This is the worst’” at particularly painful moments.

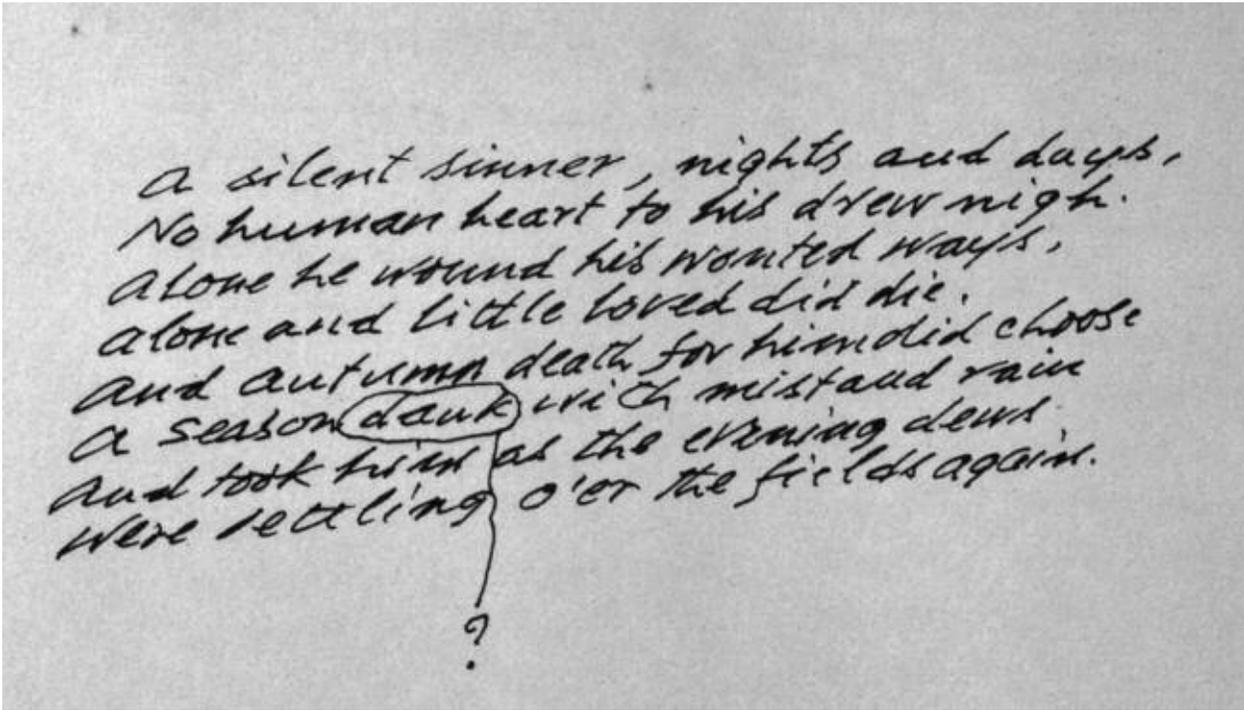
Voie lac-tée ô soeur lu-mi-neuse Des blancs ruis-seaux de Cha-naan

Et des corps blancs des a-mou-reuses Na-geurs morts sui-vrons-nous d'-ahan

Ton cours ver d'au-tres né-bu-leuses

ABOVE: A musical notation of Beckett’s way of reading “*La chanson du mal aimé*,” by Apollinaire.

OVERLEAF: Samuel Beckett, with glasses on the forehead, *January 7, 1967. Brush and ink on paper, 27.8 x 20.7 cm.*



A J. M. Synge poem written down from memory by Beckett.

In spite of his own, carefully accented way of reading poetry, it didn't seem to bother Sam that Yeats read some of his own poems, with notable exceptions, at breakneck speed—as though he couldn't wait to get the reading over with. Perhaps because of the tension. He did agree that, in contrast, Dylan Thomas's readings were very good, “memorable.” When we read Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium,” Sam would stop at

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake

stressing the “m” in “form” and “enamelling,” the “as” with a drowsy z-sound. From 1959 on, especially when we were dining at home, Yeats was as often on the menu as Samuel Johnson and Dante. (If Johnson was Sam's interlocutor, Dante was his mentor. As a young man in Florence he apparently always carried a small copy of Dante.) One evening he recited the “Girl's Song” from the “Crazy Jane” sequence:

I went out alone
 To sing a song or two . . .

When he came to the last lines—

When everything is told,
 Saw I an old man young
 Or a young man old?

—he looked up, with a glimmer in his eyes, as if to say, “You see?” The lines from “Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad,”

A girl that knew all Dante once
 Lived to bear children to a dunce

were recited with indignation, anger even, as though personally offended. About “Under Ben Bulben,” he mentioned the original of the epitaph Yeats wrote as being

Hold rein. Hold breath.



but that Yeats had crossed out those four words and continued directly with the final version:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

and when I told him I preferred the first version, he disagreed, and gave examples of the *suste viator* (“halt, traveller”) genre, from Swift, to Yeats’s lines on Synge, and so on. This in turn led him to discuss—with immense gusto, scholar that he was, in spite of himself—the *ubi sunt* topos (“where are they now, those dead and gone”), which led inevitably to Thomas Nashe’s “Summer’s Last Will and Testament” in the same vein:

Brightness falls from the air
Queens have died young and fair

These lines we would end up chanting together, he stressing a pause after each line, followed by a momentary silence pregnant with feeling, sometimes followed by a predictable reference to Villon (“*Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?*”; “But where are the snows of yesteryear?”)

Reciting from Yeats’s “Friends,” in coming to the lines

While up from my heart’s root
So great a sweetness flows
I shake from foot to foot

Sam would stand up and repeat them, saying: “Imagine such feeling—‘So great a sweetness flows / I shake from head to foot,’” in amazement.

After the cremation of his old friend Con Leventhal, we walked back from the cemetery (Père Lachaise, where, sitting next to us, he noted down the urn number of Con’s ashes) to Con’s flat, where Marion, his companion, had prepared a light buffet. Sam leaned against the wall, a glass of wine in his hand, and recited from that poem,

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come

And here he hesitated, squared his shoulders, then went on firmly,

The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath
Seem but the clouds of the sky...

Thus the title of his 1977 play . . . *but the clouds* . . .

He would recite from “At the Hawk’s Well,” and talk of Yeats’s last poems of and in old age, urging me to read them again. He himself wrote poems on old age, as in

Age is when to a man
huddled o’er the ingle
Shivering for the hag
To put the pan in the bed
And bring the toddy
She comes in the ashes
Who loved could not be won
Or won not loved
Or some other trouble
Comes in the ashes
Like in that old light
The face in the ashes
That old starlight
On the earth again.

He often recited Swift’s famous epitaph, and said of him that he was in a cage, meaning Ireland. In a lighter mood, John Gay’s epitaph once came to mind:

Life is a jest and all things show it.
I thought so once and now I know it.

He liked to recite, in unison, Sir Walter Raleigh’s “Even such is Time . . .” (since he loved to share the lines he loved, as has been shown), just as he wrote out for us his own beautiful translation of Fontenelle, from *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des mondes*: “*De mémoire de rose on n’a vu que le même jardinier*”—“No gardener has died within rosaceous memory.”

He also translated Rimbaud, Breton, Eluard, Crevel; and often talked of Gérard de Nerval, Joachim du Bellay, Chateaubriand (chiefly his René), Montale, Leopardi—the last always calling up Schopenhauer in his wake, an extremely and understandably important figure in Sam’s life—and other Italian and Spanish poets. There were times when listening to him was like

attending the courses he'd taken at Trinity College with his professors Thomas Rudmose-Brown, R.B.D. French (whom A. had met in Dublin in 1958), and H.O. White, whose knowledge had been given wings by a poet, one affectionate and ever grateful to them.

We didn't talk about or read from Keats's letters until the 1970's, when I first read them. I mentioned the "Negative Capability" passage to Sam, who, of course, had read it when he studied Keats; when I came to "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" he became tense with attention, suddenly sitting bolt upright as though pierced by an electric current, and asked me to read it again at the table, and repeated excitedly, "irritable reaching after fact and reason—that's it, capable of being in uncertainties." He didn't have to explain why he found this so important; the link to his own work was so obvious.

Of writers or poets of the seventeenth century, besides Bunyan, whom he'd absorbed but didn't quote from much, he often recited Milton. Especially the lines "Hail holy light" from *Paradise Lost*, Book III (with which Winnie in *Happy Days* begins Act II), recited with great but restrained emotion; the Milton music trickles like a transfusion through his work. The first evening he recited those lines, the "h"s and "l"s, placed where they were, sounded familiar, a troubling echo of other lines which I couldn't place. The next time he recited them there was the same feeling of recognition. Again I couldn't say why, but it was something in the way he recited, stopping after "Hail," drawing out the "hol" in "holy." Then, in a dream one night after an illness, I saw two parchment scrolls illuminated in black, red, and gold, like medieval manuscripts, rolled out in slow motion, one entitled "Hail holy light," the other unrolling beneath it entitled "Hallel" (meaning "praise" in Hebrew—hence the word "hallelujah," "Praise God"). "Hallel" is a religious service consisting of a selection of psalms in Hebrew, which Milton knew well enough to translate.

There was a similarity in the alliteration and mood of exaltation, benediction and quiet ardor in that Hebrew-English encounter. The simultaneous appearance of the two scrolls was a gift from both Milton and David the psalmist—an epiphany. I recently read that Milton had the Bible read to him every morning at 4 a.m. in Hebrew, and that he called the Psalms "the greatest poems in the world." When I thought about it, I realized that whenever Sam recited "Hail holy light" it had sounded like a prayer.

Sam had several editions of the Bible—four in different languages (the "Family Bible," "*la Sainte Bible*," "*L'Antico Testamento*," the Luther Bible)—as well as at least one concordance and the "Book of Common Prayer." His mother had been a Quaker, and Bible-reading was important. As a Protestant, he'd read the Old Testament as well as the New. We used to read the Psalms together, he and I taking turns with the King James version, A. reading, or reciting by heart, the Hebrew. Indirect references to Job in his work are discernable, and, in fact, biblical structures and references, however disguised, are sprinkled throughout his texts. Thus the use of the cohortative in "Lessness": "He will curse God again as in the blessed days" or "He will stir in the sand . . . He will live again the space of a step."

From the New Testament, Sam's favourite Gospel was Luke. He would recite the parable from Luke 12, reading the lines about the rich man with sarcasm, then thundering, "Thou fool, this night thy soul will be required of thee," looking as stern as a prophet. Mocking his own supposed laziness, Sam would say, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard," but whereas most people remember only that part, he'd quote to the end of the line: "Consider her ways and be wise." He also quoted the lines about the two thieves from St. Augustine ("Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved, do not presume: one of the thieves was damned"), which would lead in turn to a few lines from Ecclesiastes.

In bringing up paradigmatic figures in the Old Testament, we talked about Abraham and Moses, the qualities of mercy and compassion, the Hebrew root of "compassion," *rahamim*, being the same as for "womb," *rehem*. He was extremely struck by the story of the rabbis who, in discussing the end of time, say justice will be absolute—one of them, Rav Ulla, adding, "May I never see that day" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 68).

Chuckle of agreement, It sounded like something he might have said.

