“An American bitch”: Beckett’s Love’s Labor’s Lost

Abstract: Samuel Beckett is not often thought of as a love poet, but much of his early poetry explores such personal relationships in intimate terms. In Shakespeare’s most poignant plays, love is almost always lost (except for his most formulaic comedies), as it is in Beckett’s poetry, despite one’s labors. This essay explores that thread of love in Beckett’s poetry, and, more importantly, its return in his late media experiments as a series of hauntings, a preoccupation that Derrida would call hauntology. The principal figures of Krapp’s Last Tape, “Ohio Impromptu”, “...but the clouds…”, “Ghost Trio”, and “Eh, Joe” remain haunted by failed love as they replay, time and again, the separation and its ghostly aftermath after one of the partners either dies or leaves to pursue what at the time was deemed a higher goal, art, of one form or another. This treatment of Beckett’s writings on love was originally delivered as a keynote address, “Beckett’s Love’s Labor’s Lost”, for the University of Gdańsk Samuel Beckett Seminar, “Beckett’s Faces”, and for the BETWEEN.POMIĘDZY 2018 Festival and Literary Conference as something of a backstory to the laboratory film made during and sponsored by that conference and called Beckett on the Baltic: Love’s Labor’s Lost. Its world premiere was held at the BETWEEN.POMIĘDZY 2019 Festival and Literary Conference.

Keywords: love, ghosts, haunting, media, Shakespeare, Yeats

“We sat grown quiet at the name of love”
William Butler Yeats, “Adam’s Curse” (1902)\(^1\)

One running joke among Shakespearians is that there are no happy marriages in Shakespeare’s plays. What that might say about the Bard’s personal life is beyond the scope of this essay, but we might say that happiness, like virtue in general, is non- or even anti-dramatic. On the other hand, suffice it to say that the Bard’s plays exhibit no shortage of courting, sex play, seduction and romance, the last two synonymous perhaps. How long such states of ecstatic attraction last is, again, another matter, or another discussion. Suffice it to say that Shakespeare’s treatment of love and its corollary, physical attraction, is, to say the least, complicated. Even the title of his Love’s Labor’s Lost, published in 1598 without apostrophes, is fraught with difficulties, awkward

if not confusing, the current spelling of the title established only in the third Folio of 1663–4. But consistent among the folios is the plot of three young men of varying classes associated with the King of Navarre, and at whose behest all pledge to deny love, or at least to abandon love for three years to study its possibilities and implications, avoiding in the process all contact with women. The compact is laid out in the play’s opening speech, Navarre’s address to his minions:

“Th’ endeavor of this present breath may buy
That honor which shall bate his scythe’s keen edge
And make us heirs of all eternity.
Therefore, brave conquerors, for so you are
That war against your own affections
And the huge army of the world’s desires,
Our late edict shall strongly stand in force.
Navarre shall be the wonder of the world;
Our court shall be a little academe,
Still and contemplative in living art.
You three, Berowne, Dumaine, and Longaville,
Have sworn for three years’ term to live with me,
My fellow scholars, and to keep those statutes”\(^2\).

One issue of the title, then, is whether the apostrophe in Labor’s is a possessive or a contraction. It might simply be that the labor of love, three years of scholarship, say, is lost in or through that laborious process; that is, through their devotion to scholarship on love the four lovers lose it, that is, love. Shakespeare’s comedy is unusual here in that the principles do not marry in a glorious finale, even as such is planned, since the principals have by then lost their loves, or at least their love has been replaced by a year of mourning imposed on the about-to-be-consummated courtship by the Princess of France, whose father has just died, and she and the women of her entourage decamp to return to France. In Much Ado about Nothing of 1598-9, Claudio, captivated by and devoted to Hero, is fed innuendo, that is, gossip, and so is deceived into rejecting her at the altar on the erroneous belief that she has been unfaithful – like Othello, say. Benedick, a love denier who swore never to marry, is finally converted and joins Beatrice to set matters right, and all join in a dance celebrating forgiveness and the marriages of both couples. The attack on Hero’s fidelity was indeed, it turns out, Much Ado about Nothing. Love’s Labor’s Lost has no such comic resolution, nor has it a sequel to set matters right, as we have in Henry IV, Part II, say, and so we have no testament beyond the ending of the play that love’s labor’s may be permanently lost, its heat cooled by a year of mourning.

Of marriage, one might say that Beckett is the equal of Shakespeare given the perpetual bickering between those couples who are married, Maddy and Dan Rooney, in *All that Fall*, for instance. We might quibble about what to call the relationship between the pseudo-couple, Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, but they do refer to their, or at least to a, honeymoon, and in the present that is the play, but, as in their past, happiness seems to elude them. Gogo recalls to Didi the pictures in the *Bible* of his youth, apparently: “I remember the maps of the Holy Land.

Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That’s where we’ll go, I used to say, that’s where we’ll go for our honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy”\(^5\). Who exactly the “we” refers to in this nostalgic recollection remains one of the cruxes in the Beckett discourse. But the failed romance rather than the failed marriage becomes the field of play for Beckett, play in all senses of that term, as what is lost, or often just abandoned by one partner or another, is love’s labor, or at least that labor, love’s labor is in conflict with and so detrimental to another labor, the labor of artistic creation. That is to say, Beckett was not without interest in love; its consummation was simply not a priority and so rejection or abandonment is love’s condition most entertained. That said, Beckett was capable of some of the most tender statements on love, as in the poem of 1936, not the French radio play of the same title of 1961, “Cascando”, the second and very short third stanzas of which are stunningly tender amid the uncertainties of love and its possible rejection, in what was for Beckett at the time, a new and lexically direct, even anti-Joycean style:

\(^2\)

saying again
if you do not teach me I shall not learn
saying again there is a last
even of last times
last times of begging
last times of loving
of knowing not knowing pretending
a last even of last times of saying
if you do not love me I shall not be loved
if I do not love you I shall not love
the churn of stale words in the heart again
love love love thud of the old plunger
pestling the unalterable
whey of words
terrified again
of not loving
of loving and not you

of being loved and not by you
of knowing not knowing pretending
pretending
I and all the others that will love you
if they love you
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unless they love you”⁴.

The poem finally details the deterioration of love preliminary to its termination, the bare bones of an echo suggested by “saying again”. Poet Robert Pinsky has called it “[a] modern love poem in conflict with both love and poetry”, to which he adds, “[f]or me, that hovering, back-and-forth movement between passion and reservations, need and doubt, images and disavowals, creates a strong emotion”⁵. Even as Lawrence Harvey saw the poem as the one masterpiece of the first Poems in English, Robert Scanlan notes in 2014, reviewing what amounts to a variorum edition of Beckett’s poems: “It strikes me as highly uncharacteristic of the Beckett poetic style. It is all-too easy to like this flat-out lyrical love poem. It contains the following highly ‘accessible’, singing lines”⁶. Irish poet Paul Muldoon takes stern issue with Beckett’s poetry in general: “To begin with, Beckett has almost no sense of how a line functions in verse making. To describe his line breaks as arbitrary would be a kindness”⁷. One poem Muldoon singles out for derision, in addition to “Whoroscope”, is “Cascando” and in particular to the two metaphors in stanza two: “this is truly dreadful stuff. Why go to the effort of establishing the metaphorical system of churning butter and then appeal to the quite different system of ‘pestling’?”⁸.

Pinsky cites Muldoon’s objections but defends it: “this poem, restlessly undoing and redoing itself, decidedly does not establish metaphorical systems. The ‘churn of stale words’ creates and sheds, rehearses and shreds, pumps away and restores, actual feeling – the product and also the antagonist of the pumping heart or churn or pestle. The mixed metaphor, if that is what it is, expresses a tormented way (or whey) of feeling, disavowing, and needing love”⁹.

What was perhaps Beckett’s first love, his first cousin Peggy Sinclair, died on 3 May 1933 of tuberculosis at age 22, while Beckett was in Dublin. She is commemorated,

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⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Robert Pinsky, “Always…”.
if that is the word, remembered at least, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* as the Smeraldina-Rima, but ridiculed shortly thereafter in the short story of *More Pricks than Kicks* called “The Smeraldina’s Billet-doux”, which apparently reproduces one of her letters almost verbatim. Less than two months after Peggy died, Beckett’s father, Bill Beckett, died unexpectedly as well. By 1938 Beckett imagines a death bed return to her, something of a tribute, if not a reunion (Beckett is in Dublin, Peggy in Kassel Germany when she dies, her current fiancé, Heiner Starcke, at her side) in the touchingly personal poem of 1938, “Ascension”, two years after “Cascando”, 20 years before their romantic abandonment is reprised more directly in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and 27 years before a variation on rejection is elaborated in *Eh Joe*. In the poem, an “elle”, a she expires as the prodigal lover returns to witness her death amid an ejaculation of blood which parallels ejaculations in the street from World Cup football fans (presumably the 1938 FIFA World Cup held in Bordeaux), and who, the title suggests, ascends thereafter, perhaps like Christ on Holy Thursday, or at least she ascends above the rabble of the street as the prodigal, “her bloke” as he is called in English, “closes the eyelids with filthy fingers/ green eyes big with surprise”10. But why does it take five years for Beckett to deal with this material and why with tenderness in apparent contrast to the devastating if not brutal treatment of her in “The Smeraldina’s Billet-doux” of 1934?

Robert Scanlan focuses on this tumultuous period in Beckett’s life: “The disease and death of Peggy Sinclair, who contracted and died from tuberculosis (‘my darling’s red sputum’) in her and Sam’s youth appalled the incipient writer, and devastated his emotional world. His father’s awful heart attacks and death just weeks after Peggy’s death sent Beckett into a decade-long tailspin, and the painfully contorted and opaque early poetry follows the spoor of this unbearable psychic pain and disorientation. It is not lyrical by any conventional means. It is so tortured and hemmed in that it seems anti-poetry, dry and desiccated, harsh and bilious, impacted and unwell”11. Citing Knowlson, furthermore, Steven Connor also summarizes the period that led Beckett to Psychoanalysis: “Beckett underwent something very like a breakdown; he resigned his fellowship at Trinity, and it seemed he would be unable to make a living as long as he was in Ireland. His depression expressed itself in endless unshiftable colds and flu, boils and cysts and panic attacks accompanied by palpitations and sensations of suffocation. He was persuaded by his friend Geoffrey Thompson that his symptoms might be of psychosomatic origin and managed to persuade his mother in turn to let him come to London in late 1933 specifically in order to undertake analysis. Early in 1934 he began therapy at the Tavistock Clinic with Wilfred Bion […]”12. “Ascension” may have been a product of that intense self-analysis. And yet, John Pilling notes in his indispensable compendium of facts, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, that on June 29th 1938, just days after

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completing the previously stuck typescript of Murphy: “Meets Mary Stockton Farley, the focus of his feelings for the poem ‘Cascando’, written in July.” Beckett had by then terminated his analysis with Bion. In their equally indispensable The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett, Pilling and his former graduate student Seán Lawlor elaborate on this encounter, here summarized by Robert Scanlan in his review of the book: “[Lawrence Harvey] apparently did not know that Beckett wrote it [Cascando] under the immediate spell of a new love interest. Cambridge’s own Molly Adams, or Mary Manning Howe as she was then known, one of the original founders of The Poets’ Theatre, introduced Beckett to her friend Betty Stockton Farley and Betty and Sam had a passionate fling. That got his mind off Peggy. It also ignited a new mood, a new and immediately practical lyrical strain. But Betty was done after a brief nine days. Sam was left hopelessly ‘in love’, in a very old-fashioned (and timeless) way. Does the gossip kill the poem?” On April 6, 1957 Beckett wrote his American publisher as he was preparing a collection of Beckett’s poems, the Farley rejection still apparently sensitive: “Pleased that you should wish to publish my poems. The Limes Verlag, as I think I told you, are doing the French and English originals with German translation. When you send me the odd ones you have collected, apart [sic] from Whoroscope and the Bones, I shall see if I can find any others in my chaotic archives. I have lost many and not all are worth reprinting. There is one wild love one called ‘Cascando’ you might like. An American bitch.” How we answer Scanlan’s rhetorical question about such revelations, the possibility that such gossip might kill the poem (for he certainly does not), may be less to the point than how Beckett “churned” those experiences of attraction and rejection into something, well, approaching permanence. But Knowlson claims that the infatuation was not consummated: “they became good friends […] She was simply not interested romantically. […] Betty did not respond and the affair (which had never really been one) ended its short, one-sided existence.” But Pilling and Lawler take the affair more seriously than does Knowlson, and even as Knowlson suggests that “Cascando” was “written under her spell”, Pilling and Lawlor suggest another influence, that “Cascando”, a musical term for diminution or decrescendo, had a literary source as well. It owes at least as much, at least in structure, they suggest, to Thomas MacGreevy’s poem, “Dechtire” [Deck-tire], wife of Conchubar and mother of Cuchulainn, particularly its lines “I do not love you as I have loved/ The loves that I have loved – / As I may love others.”

17 Ibid., 229.
But Beckett did bounce back from the Farley rejection in 1938 with, apparently, some rebound sex, this with the woman who introduced Beckett to Farley, Mary Manning Howe (1905–1999), then married to Harvard Law Professor, Mark De Wolfe Howe, living in Boston, and working with The Poets’ Theatre group that Scanlan mentions above, but visiting Dublin at the time. Howe apparently consoled Sam. The relationship evidently scandalized the Becketts and ended only with Howe’s return to Boston and Beckett’s flight to Germany, precipitated in good part by the affair. After Peggy Sinclair died in 1933, Beckett fled to London and began therapy early in 1934. After the Howe affair ended, Beckett fled to Germany. Some nine months later, a daughter was born, leading some to speculate that the child may have been Beckett’s. In his curious amalgam of stories, built around three years of reading almost nothing but Beckett but harkening much to his childhood (as he saw Beckett doing), Poet Michael Coffey dwells on the gossip: “The daughter was born nine months later. She looks like Beckett. She affects a Beckett look, to this day – short cropped grey hair; she is possessed by an aquiline nose and what look like Beckett’s gnarled fingers, possibly from Dupuytren’s contracture, sometimes known as ‘the Celtic hand’. Her literary style is austere, her aesthetic uncompromising, a kind of literary abstraction”\(^\text{19}\). Having thus teased readers with a potential revelation, he goes on to say, “I tired of doing the math, which proved no such thing [that the daughter was Beckett’s child] – parturition is forty weeks, not nine months, for starters. The math does not rule anything out – or in. But a DNA test does, proving that the writer is not Beckett’s daughter but the daughter of the legal scholar [Howe’s husband, Mark] and her mother, a relief, no doubt for her mother too […]”\(^\text{20}\). Coffey, however, offers no citation and in general no bibliography of his readings detail his three-year Beckett reading siege.

Despite a sometimes scandalous love life and a penchant for flight, and literally surprisingly, perhaps, Beckett was quite capable of writing tender, sensitive sonnets, love sonnets, at that, the impulse Shakespearean, at least for a time, since he may have written at least three, 151 short of Shakespeare’s output. One of the survivors is one generally called, “At Last I Find” of 1930, a one-sentence sonnet written on the back of a manuscript page of Whoroscope, which confirms its dating, according to Pilling, thus written before, published separately twice, but then embedded in the novel, Dream of Fair to Middling Women\(^\text{21}\). Its mystical spirit is in the mode, if not in the mood of the anomalous short story called “Assumption”, published first in transition magazine:

\begin{quote}
“At Last I Find in my Confused Soul
Dark with the dark flame of the cypresses,
The certitude that I cannot be whole,
Consummate, or finally whole, unless
\end{quote}

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 16.
I be consumed and fused in the white heat
Of her sad finite essence so that none
Shall sever us who are at last complete
Eternally, irrevocably one,

One with the birdless, cloudless, colourless skies,
One with the bright purity of the fire
Of which we are and for which we must die
A rapturous strange death and be entire,

Like syzygetic stars, supernly bright,
Conjoined in One and in the Infinite!"22

In its third publication, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, the narrator reminds us that it was written by Belacqua for the Smeraldina-Rima, that is, for Peggy Sinclair. The narrator, spends most of the run up to the poem ridiculing its sentiments, however: “how chaste was the passion of attraction”, he tells us, as they “clave the one to the other in an ecstasy and an agony of mystical adhesion. Yessir! An ecstasy and an agony. A sentimental coagulum, sir, that beggers description”, the “unhappy Belacqua, separated from his douce Vega by two channels and 29 hours third if he went over Ostend”, the poem then a record of the agony of separation23.

Stale words, perhaps, with their strained rhymes and near rhymes, the concluding near comic “bright” and “Infinite”. This was an imitative phase of Beckett’s development, admittedly, one that produced another anomalous poem included in *Dream*, “Calvary by Night”24, but such “churn of stale words” is what Pinsky celebrates in “Cascando”, a poem that, as he says, “creates and sheds, rehearses and shreds, pumps away and restores, actual feeling”25. Those “actual feelings” are reprised in the lyrical, and so “accessible” episodes of Krapp’s Last Tape where the love story returns piecemealed and scorned, age ridiculing youthful passion, the perspective positively Shakespearean, as Krapp 69,

“Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it’s over. (Pause.) False ring there. (Pause.) Shadows of the opus... magnum. Closing with a – (brief laugh) – yelp to Providence. (Prolonged laugh in which Krapp joins.) What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?”

“No” because the recollection of the break up is played and replayed repeatedly: “Scalded the eyes out of me reading *Effie* again, a page a day, with tears again. *Effie* ... (Pause.) Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines,

24 Ibid., 213–4.
25 Robert Pinsky, “Always...”.

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and the dunes”\textsuperscript{26}. In his first teleplay begun on his birthday in 1965 and which became \textit{Eh, Joe}, the haunting preoccupation is again with “[t]he green one”\textsuperscript{27}, whom Joe deserted and who seems to have taken her own life, gruesomely. Both these plays, incidentally, were written with particular actors in mind, Irish actors whose voices appealed to, even haunted Beckett, Krapp for Patrick Magee, \textit{Eh Joe} for Jackie MacGowran, both of whom also died prematurely. Of Magee, biographer Anthony Cronin would say, “The general effect was strangely déclassé but still indubitably Irish and thus ideally fitted for the performance of Beckett. […] As an actor, he had the good sense to see that one played Beckett for the weight and mood of the words and the situation without bothering about the ultimate philosophical import”\textsuperscript{28}. Of that “weight and mood” Beckett would write to his American publisher, “Magee gave a very fine performance, for me by far the most satisfactory experience in the theatre up to date. I wish to goodness that Alan [Schneider] could have seen it” in preparation for its American premiere\textsuperscript{29}. Reviewing the \textit{Letters and Poems of Samuel Beckett} in the \textit{New York Times Book Review}, Paul Muldoon, hostile to Beckett’s poetry in general here celebrates the drama, its foregrounding of silence in particular: “Why radio might be the medium ‘best suited’ to Beckett comes down to a single concept – silence. No writer has understood the power of silence better than Beckett. No one has understood better than Beckett that silence is not an absence of sound but a physical presence, perhaps even a character. That certainly seems to be the case with \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape}, the monologue he wrote for Patrick Magee, which is the single greatest evocation of loss and longing of the 20th century. (Beckett’s affection for Magee is one of the many heartwarming discoveries of this volume.)”\textsuperscript{30}.

To further balance or off set the idealized and nostalgic mood of love, rejected or delayed, what Muldoon calls the “evocation of loss and longing”, Beckett undercut the narrative with gesture and by foregrounding the inanimate object as he further sexualizes \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape} in his own productions so that the tape recorder became what he called a “Mastubatory agent” for the 69 year old Krapp. Steven Connor reminds us of Beckett’s revisions, published in \textit{The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett}, Volume III, of what Beckett calls “Krapp’s tape-erotics […] the movement of the tape back and forth is a kind of mechanical masturbation for him”\textsuperscript{31}. Beckett’s notebooks for three separate productions detail the sexualization: “Tape-recorder companion of his solitude.”

\textsuperscript{26} Samuel Beckett, \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape and other Shorter Plays} (2009), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{31} Steven Connor, “Looping the Loop”, 93. Hear what Beckett found appealing in Magee’s voice on the Samuel Beckett Society web page, i.e., “[…] there’s a wonderful hunk of little-heard pieces for radio, written by Samuel Beckett. Among them is a 1957 BBC recording of From An Abandoned Work – a monologue (that started in 1954 as a bit of prose) delivered by an old man remembering his youth”, Antonia Quirke, \textit{New Statesman}. https://samuelbeckettsociety.org/2018/06/09/samuel-beckett-radio-online/ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8sblLeDA8E This is the performance that led shortly after the broadcast to Beckett’s writing the “Magee Monologue” that became \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape}. 

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Masturbatory agent”, says Beckett, essentially in dialogue with himself, as his production notes usually were. “This onanistic association”, Connor continues, “is highlighted by a change that Beckett made in 1969 when directing the play in German in the Schiller-Theater in Berlin. Where the published text has Krapp say of his recent concourse with Fanny, the obliging “bony old ghost of a whore” that it was “better than a kick in the crutch”, Beckett substituted “etwas besser als zwischen Daumen und Zeigefinger”. In French the following year Beckett would revise “mais sans doute mieux qu’un coup de pied dans l’entre-jambes” to “mais quand même un peu mieux qu’entre pouce et index”, and he substituted “better than the thumb and forefinger” in the English production he directed in Berlin in 1977.

“Beckett specifies in his directing of the play that Krapp is to keep hold of the play and wind buttons as he listens to the lake-episode, this making the tape-recorder correspond to the imagined body of the woman. The erotic relation between the tape and the body is also brought to the fore in the pun in the title of the French version of the play, *La dernière bande*; since *bander* is to get an erection, then the last tape is also the last stiffy.

Krapp’s solo sexuality stands in sharp contrast to the lyrical, seductive narrative textuality of the tape and the re-imagined body of a woman to which the 69 year old Krapp is now drawn, embraces, and manipulates the tape as expertly as he apparently does his own sexuality. In his production, Beckett was very much aware of those two sexual worlds on stage suggested by the two contrasting reels of the tape, which he embraces and manipulates in a balance, a ballet of revelation and concealment with certain intentional incomprehensibilities accent in Beckett’s stagings as the rapid winding and rewinding squeal, the winding itself Beckett noted to be “mechanical with gabble.”

Less fully examined among Beckett’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost* works is the Yeats-inflected teleplay …*but the clouds….,* in which the rejecting female lover departs because “Poetry was her only love”, the phrase abbreviated in the next ts. to “W: Poetry (was my) only love”, or as he originally intended to call the work, “Poetry only Love”. Marjorie Perloff suggests a range of links between Beckett and Yeats but also notes that “The particular tonality of …*but the clouds…..* can be traced back to the famous scene in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), when the taped voice of the monologuist’s former self recalls a decisive

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34 Steven Connor, “Looping the Loop”, 93.
35 Ibid.
37 Steven Connor, “Looping the Loop”, 94.
39 S. E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett’s Dramatic Texts*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 125; see also University of Reading Beckett Archive MS 1553/2.
love scene of his youth”. While Perloff’s comments suggest some gender confusion since in ...but the clouds... the rejecting party is female and hence closer to the spirit of the poem “Cascando” than to Krapp’s Last Tape. Nonetheless, the link she suggests is provocative. Enoch Brater puts his emphasis on stage space in his analysis of ...but the clouds... A committed anti-theorist, Brater here seems grudgingly to entertain the spirit of multiplicity in Beckett’s work:

“Beckett makes darkness suggest other spaces, peripheries where other dramas may be enacted. Shadow space frames in a circle of light the drama we do see through the larger frame of the rectangular television box. Beckett graphically isolates his image here in a stark visual landscape that serves as a further emblem of the male figure’s solitude. On the television screen shadow space is negative space, but Beckett uses it in ...but the clouds... to confuse our sense of just what constitutes the positive and the negative.”

Confusion may not be the word here, of course, but what is the word? Potentiality or multiplicity, perhaps. Nor is the issue one of positive and negative space, since as I have argued in any number of books and essays, there is no negative space on Beckett’s stage, only unselected potentialities, and that has been an underlying principle of my last several workshop productions of Beckett’s texts, most recently ...but the clouds... The spirit of the teleplay (as of all Beckett’s writings on love, perhaps) is captured by Yeats’s question in Part III of “The Tower” that is not directly cited in the play: “Does the imagination dwell the most/ Upon a woman won or woman lost?” That may be the underlying thread of Beckett’s pedagogies of love, and ...but the clouds... offers another variation on this recurrent if not obsessive Beckettian theme. Love lost is what ignites the imagination, in this case presented in a medium that concretizes the apparition but keeps it immaterial on the screen at the same time, the haunting face of a woman pixilated, whom Beckett described thus, “The woman I see in her thirties. A haunting face, not necessarily beautiful”. She is lost to him because her only love, apparently, was poetry. The work thus mirrors Krapp’s Last Tape in which Krapp bids “Farewell to love” for the benefit of his intellectual pursuits, now failed dishly. And Beckett tells German producer Reinhart Mueller-Freienfels that “[...] the man in “...but the clouds...” is he same as in Ghost Trio, in another, later situation, and it would be a great pity if we could not have the same actor [Klaus Herm] for both parts”, especially since both teleplays were being produced for the same evening broadcast. In Eh, Joe, furthermore, Joe abandons female lovers, one of whom takes her own life in the aftermath.

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44 Ibid.
And the treatment of a lost love in *...but the clouds...* is not too unlike those manifest for an instant in a cloud, “Enueg II”, or in ashes as in *Words and Music*. The teleplay features two images for the male figure: M hunched over, obscuring his desk, and M1, or M in the set, either dressed for the road, in dark “Hat and greatcoat”, or for bed, in light “robe and skullcap”. Our primary decision in this performance was to present “M in set” live. M’s voice, a recorded V, observes, records or directs M, imagining, revising, and repeating his daily comings and goings and his conjuring or “begging” W, “woman’s face reduced as far as possible to eyes and mouth”45, to appear in the dead of night. The other central decision was to present W live at the end in a distant, real-life apparition, to materialize her image (see image). M at first details the possibilities of her appearance: 1, she appears and instantly is gone; 2, she appears and lingers; and 3, she appears and utters the words of Yeats’s poem. A fourth possibility is that she does not appear at all, whereupon M busies himself with mathematics, cube roots, awaiting dawn and the resumption of his aimless wanderings. The closing image of the play features the poignant, even sentimental third possibility.

Such laboratory performances to small, selected audiences foreground Beckett’s engagement and interrogation of issues of lost love and attempts at consolation, issues one might deem sentimental, the resulting laboratory performances evoking other, alternative possibilities of interpretation. The layered multiplicity of images in *Ohio Impromptu*, for example, put the lie to the oft-stated premise that beyond the live stage image lies emptiness, as Peter Brook might have it, or negative space, as Brater suggests. Instead, the darkness was replete with repeated and alternate images already implicit in the text. The close up video images of the hands that we tried to achieve in *Ohio Impromptu*, for instance, images often difficult to see in standard stage productions, suggested at times Albrecht Dürer’s famous etching of praying hands so favored by Beckett. The image hung in his childhood bedroom, apparently. Moreover, the gaze of the audience was often redirected to unscripted projected sequences, multiple images, some of which overlay the live images creating layers of consciousness, a panoply of ghosts. The resulting affect was thus differently charged from that in productions not hybridized. The cameraman was visible as well as he moved around what was thereby accented as a theatrical or a film space. And the most salient rethinking of *...but the clouds...* was not only the result of V distantly materialized at the work’s conclusion, but an apparent conflict or tension that arose between bathos and pathos that surprisingly lay at the heart of this work. The quick changes of M’s costumes in real time, especially with, in this case, a visible dresser, suggested the play’s comic undertones that undercut the overt sentimentality of love’s labor’s lost, which potentially, like the sentiments in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, bordered on the maudlin; the resultant emotional rebalancing foregrounded the tension of a pathos undercut by bathos. The image of W, moreover, instead of winding down as the teleplay ends, is regenerated even revitalized through its materialization.

unsummoned, uncommented on, just there. Such overtly experimental, laboratory productions open possibilities for Beckett’s works beyond those evident in what we might consider accepted or received stagings, struggle, in fact, to get beyond such stagings. Beckett is not Shakespeare, of course, but his interrogation of love, his detailed pedagogies of, principally, love’s failures, his re-mappings of love’s terrain are almost as detailed and begin to suggest that Beckett too might be revisioned as something of a love poet, at least a love poet for an ironic late 20th if not 21st centuries, even as the subject had already been exhausted by Shakespeare’s time. The issue, then, is how to get beyond “the churn of stale words in the heart again” the “again” serving as a point of punctuation. Mapped here are Beckett’s attempts if not his solutions, and such a map suggests a path to and through laboratory performances.

Bibliography
Beckett, Samuel. “Cascando”. The full poem and the complete Pilling/Lawlor notes are available at the Poetry Society of America web page where they are listed as “adapted from”: https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/own_words/samuel_Beckett/

46 Samuel Beckett, “Cascando”. (Listen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2FKcAwSOaQ)


