In a letter of 11 April 1972, replying to questions more detailed, and indeed more audacious, than any that I should now presume to put to him, Samuel Beckett wrote as follows: “I simply know next to nothing about my work in this way, as little as a plumber of the history of hydraulics. There is nothing/nobody with me when I’m writing, only the hellish job in hand. The ‘eye of the mind’ in Happy Days does not refer to Yeats any more than the ‘revels’ in Endgame (refer) to The Tempest. They are just bits of pipe I happen to have with me. I suppose all is reminiscence from womb to tomb. All I can say is I have scant information concerning mine—alas.”

In this essay, I want to examine the status of some of Beckett’s “bits of pipe,” limiting myself, since the subject is a rather large one, to the quotations that are found in the English and French versions of Happy Days, but also seeing how this issue can be related to certain wider aspects of Beckett’s dramatic technique and considering not only the play in the light of his remarks but also his remarks in the light of the play. In the letter just quoted, was Samuel Beckett, to put it a trifle baldly, merely adopting a favorite defensive stance, namely that of ignorance, whether feigned or real, or was he assuming the perspective of the worm in the core of the apple, unable to perceive the outside of the apple in the way that others can? Or does Beckett’s comment (as I believe it does) say something
perfectly valid about the status of quotation in *Happy Days* in particular, but also in his plays in general, that is worth examining much more fully?

The identification of Winnie’s quotations now belongs to past critical history. They were identified for us in any case by Beckett himself in the fourth typescript of the English play, preserved in the Ohio State University Library. Ever since, the authorship and location of Winnie’s “wonderful lines” have been scrupulously recorded by Beckett in preliminary notes that he sent to Alan Schneider and in notebooks prepared for his own productions of the play in Berlin and London, sometimes situating the sources with words such as “end of speech beginning ‘oh what a noble mind’” (for the “oh woe is me” quotation) and “Marcellus disappearance of ghost” (for the “bird of dawning” quotation), adding only in 1979, “sorrow keeps breaking in” as a deliberate distortion of Oliver Edwards’s remark to Dr. Johnson, “cheerfulness was always breaking in.” Since Ruby Cohn’s first book on Beckett in 1962, it has been known, therefore, that Winnie is familiar with “such good old poets as Shakespeare, Milton, Herrick, Gray, Keats and Browning” and also quotes from Edward Fitzgerald, W. B. Yeats, and Charles Wolfe. The sources of the French quotations in *Oh les beaux jours* have also been clearly identified, ranging from Beckett’s own translations of Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, and Keats to Ronsard’s *Stances* (for “bouchette ble’mie”) and Racine’s “Qu’ils pleurent, oh mon Dieu, qu’ils frémissent de crainte,” which becomes in Beckett’s play “Qu’ils frémissent de honte.” And, of course, the different tone and associations of the French title, provided by the quotation from Paul Verlaine’s poem *Colloque sentimental* (“ah les beaux jours de bonheur indicible / Où nous joignions nos bouches—C’est possible”) have also been noted and explored. All of this, like the presence of death in Ionesco’s play, *Tueur sans gages* (*The Killer*), is already “known, assimilated, catalogued.”

On the evidence of the manuscripts in the Ohio State University Library, the choice of these quotations was made by Beckett with considerable care and with great concern for their relationship with important themes of the play. Several schol-
ars have examined the echoes that are set up by Winnie’s allusions to some of the “classics” of English and French literature. It seems, in fact, irrefutable, as Ruby Cohn wrote in *Back to Beckett*, that Winnie’s quotations comment ironically on the cruel landscape, speak of woe, and invite the proximity of death. And S. E. Gontarski has extended these ironies to discover in Winnie’s use of quotations important Beckettian themes and wider mythic patterns. He writes that “the themes of the failure of love, the misery of the human condition, the transitoriness of all things, the disjunction between the real and the ideal, the misery of awareness, have been carefully reinforced in Winnie’s literary allusions and reverberate through the play like a constant drumbeat.”

Yet there is a world of difference between noting and exploring the subtle ironies set up by the presence of these quotations and, as other critics have done, stressing the *co-presence* of both texts, that of Beckett and of the work quoted by Winnie, to the extent of reading Beckett’s play as if it were a development, an ironic reflection, or, in some cases, even a parody of the original source work. One scholar, for example, has considered Winnie and Willie as echoes of Verlaine’s ghosts from *Colloque sentimental*. Another has written that “only if we take the whole passage [the Shakespearean “O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown” speech] and substitute Winnie and Willie [for Ophelia and Hamlet] can we appreciate the grotesque parody implied,” or again, “Winnie persists as a parody Prometheus because there is nothing else to do.” A critical approach that may seem to be justified by the apparent openness of Beckett’s technique of verbal and visual allusiveness has tended to become quite the opposite: unduly explicit, over-referential, imaginatively restrictive, and inappropriate to Beckett’s handling of the theatrical medium.

There are, in fact, several good reasons why we should consider the quotations in *Happy Days* a good deal less referentially than this and acknowledge that, by focusing too hard on reference, we might only too easily be missing the much more important function. First, of course, is the obvious fact that Winnie’s “wonderful lines” register in the theater only within
certain specific constraints. There is no time during a performance to formulate or to dwell on extended parallels between Winnie and Hamlet, no time to consider the analogies between Romeo's discovery of Juliet, lying seemingly dead, and Winnie's studied contemplation of her own face in the mirror, "ensign crimson . . . pale flag." Secondly, two of Winnie's quotations at least lay unidentified for several years: the quotation from Browning's *Paracelsus* and the Oliver Edwards distortion. Winnie identifies these different phrases as actual quotations by means of her characteristically reassuring "What are those wonderful / exquisite lines" in only four of the fifteen quotations that are now commonly noted. The other eleven arise far more naturally and could pass almost unnoticed in the context, except by the scholar, probably forewarned and hence on the lookout for such allusions. Further, there are also many other, only half-hidden, literary or religious allusions or actual quotations made in the course of the play: to *Hamlet*, to the Bible, to the Christian marriage ceremony, to Dante, to Schopenhauer, perhaps even to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which, along with the *Inferno*, seems to have been a major inspiration for the play. Winnie makes no distinction at all of level between her various "classics." Charles Wolfe is admired and cherished as much as are Shakespeare and Milton. All have become, one might say, "Winnieisms," bearing on occasions Winnie's characteristic *imprimatur*, the "something . . . something" of a learner of lines who is more enamoured of rhythm than she is of sense. But Winnie's questions still retain the relevance as well as the slightly foreign flavor of the borrowings.

Even without imputing to an audience the knowledge of the literary scholar, however, the spectator will register immediately some of the bitter truths found in the quotations that Winnie puts forward in the guise of phrases of reassurance: "Laughing wild amid severest woe" needs no scholarly commentary at all to echo the earlier "oh fleeting joys oh something lasting woe" and to provide an ironic commentary on Winnie's plight and a wider statement on the sad, transitory nature of human existence. The opening words of the second act, "Hail,
holy light” (“Salut, sainte lumière” in Beckett’s own French translation) almost provoke a shudder in the listener, so sharp is the irony between Winnie’s Miltonic greeting and her newly revealed state of more radical deprivation. It is not that ironies will not be reinforced or even that further layers of irony will not be revealed, if one should happen to recognize the words and the context of the original quotations. It is, I suggest, that to regard them primarily in terms of reference is to diminish their important role within the play and to misunderstand certain crucial elements of Beckett’s dramatic technique.

In another, and more important, sense, Happy Days is almost all quotation. For Beckett has Winnie confront the “hellish sun” and endure a life of growing immobility with a vocabulary of secondhand, rose-colored platitudes, clichés of middle-class piety and complacent optimism. Her speech is a kind of modernized, suburbanized Robinsonadesprache. Beckett’s first manuscript draft was called “Female Solo,”14 and, as a point of comparison with Happy Days, one may choose the dramatic monologue that Beckett most likely saw at the Comédie Française in February 1930, Jean Cocteau’s La Voix humaine, which he condemned in Proust as “not merely a banality, but an unnecessary banality.”15 When, thirty years later, Beckett came to write his own female virtual monologue, he was very careful to avoid the trap that Cocteau had fallen into, namely, that of creating a banality out of banalities. For, instead of merely using cliché in Happy Days, Beckett makes it work for him dramatically, as part of a dense linguistic structure, which is characterized by many variations in the levels of meaning, register, and tone. The numerous borrowed clichés are, then, not only registered as such by the spectator. They are made to reverberate with a subtle blend of irony, understated human feelings, and deeper philosophical concerns. The technique is complex, but stated in the broadest of terms, this effect is achieved by contrasting Winnie’s clichés and bland phrases of reassurance with the stark visual imagery of imprisonment in a barren earth and exposure to a hostile sun, and by the juxtaposition, repetition, and association of the component phrases themselves. So flat, commonplace, apparently neutral words and phrases signify at
the obvious surface level, but also prompt their own wide-ranging, and often momentous, echoes: "world without end," "cannot be cured," "sleep for ever," "blind next," "running out" are just a few examples chosen from the opening moments of the play.

Yet, as I have developed more fully elsewhere, commonplace, worn-out words, which Winnie uses to tame and domesticate a mysterious, elusive reality, also lead her to the very edge of the abyss, when sorrow, regret and loss intrude repeatedly into her busy chatter. And so the horror of her immediate predicament, a sense of the mystery of being, and a fear of the silent, solitary wilderness that may await her cannot be wholly kept at bay by her familiar, borrowed words. Literally, "sorrow keeps breaking in," in the shape of her literary quotations (the creations of others) and her fictions (her own creations), but also in the tiny qualifications of a remark, a break in, or faltering of, the voice or the swift erasure of a smile. When Winnie draws Willie's attention to the heights that she has scaled, most often she has ironically been plumbing uncommon depths of perceptiveness into the nature of her true condition: "and wait for the day to come—the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hundred hours"; "and should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts." This alternation, even interplay, of keen insight and self-deception adds substantially, of course, to the dramatic interest and the poignancy of the play, as Winnie spins her own web of words, of which she becomes the victim as well as the creator.

Winnie's quotations come, however, in different registers and occur even in several different voices, as she indulges in a highly sophisticated form of ventriloquism. She quotes, for example, the blandly ironic words of wisdom from the toothbrush handle and the medicine bottle label—in a special tone, as Ruby Cohn pointed out, in Beckett's Berlin production. The range of her voices, moreover, echoes the range of her repeated gestures and habits. She talks regularly to herself in many different tones: sharply, "as to one not paying attention"; cautiously,
“do not overdo the bag, Winnie”; anxiously, “and now?”, and so on. The range of her inquiry and address to Willie is even more diversified still. And, at the end of the play, her voice offers a chilling impersonation of her “soul-mate,” as his prenuptial pleas take the form of a piece of sardonic self-address: "Life a mockery without Win"; 20 "I worship you Winnie be mine and then nothing from that day forth only titbits from Reynolds’ News." 21 In the Shower/Cooker story, Winnie alternates between three different voices and provides a complex interweaving of accents and linguistic registers: “Stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground” [first male voice] “coarse creature, fit mate” [her own voice] “Dig her out, he says, dig her out, no sense in her like that [first male voice]—Dig her out with what? [second female voice] she says [her own voice]—I’d dig her out with my bare hands [first male voice] he says—Must have been man and wife [her own voice].” 22 In the French translation, the shifts from assumed vulgarity to natural censoriousness are even more marked, providing an impressive tribute to Beckett’s bilingual sensitivity. Finally, the “Milly and the mouse” narrative introduces sharp pain into a fictional world that is reminiscent not only of the child’s fairy tale but of the setting of a Katherine Mansfield story (The Dove’s Nest, for example). The vocabulary is again borrowed, this time from the literature of the nursery, with its stock epithets, and its child’s perspective on the world: “big, waxen dolly,” “complete outfit,” “frilly frock,” “legends in real print,” “steep wooden stairs,” and “silent passage.” 23 But the real screams contrast sharply with this borrowed, rehearsed, even stilted terminology. To regard this as parody of the style of the nursery tale—even less of Katherine Mansfield—is to miss the point entirely. For it is with these delicate, stylistic borrowings, recited in a tiny child’s voice, that Winnie expresses obliquely a sense of the violence of sex, procreation, and birth, and the mystery of pain and being. Primarily, these elements are used then functionally, combining important tonal variety with the oblique, thematic significance of this fiction and the Shower/Cooker encounter.

In conclusion, it is worth stressing how much this creation of
a multiplicity of voices, levels, tones, and registers demands by way of active involvement on the part of the spectator. By a technique that clearly owes far more to suggestion and ambiguity than it does to reference, the spectator is able to move freely between these different levels, questioning, judging, and often supplying what is hinted at rather than stated. Reference is, then, anathema for Samuel Beckett, as it was for Stéphane Mallarmé, for whom "nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu; le suggérer, voilà le rêve." If Mallarmé is here a potent source for inspiration for Beckett, it may be the example of John Millington Synge, whose own dramatic allusiveness followed no "sustained referential scheme," that helped Beckett avoid some of the dangers inherent in the symbolist legacy. Beckett, unlike those dramatic heirs of symbolism commonly referred to under the label of the "Theater of the Unspoken" (e.g., Maeterlinck, Bernard, Vildrac), is not attempting to evoke a world of mystery or of the spirit; nor is he trying to convey obliquely or by means of silence the inner life of his characters; nor again is there any Pinteresque "weasel under the cocktail cabinet" in Beckett's theater. The silences that figure prominently in Beckett's plays are filled more by the spectator measuring what is being seen against what has just been said or following, within specific constraints, the multiple associations aroused by preceding statements or patterns of statements. For, in a very real sense, Beckett's verbal and visual imagery echoes not on the boards alone but in the mind of the spectator.

Winnie's "classics" differ hardly at all, then, from the remainder of the text. It may be said, of course, that part of their function is to add further levels of meaning. But the variations in voice, level, tone, and register that they introduce tend to predominate over the actual "references" themselves. The "bits of pipe" of which Beckett speaks do not "refer," as he suggests, therefore in this sense. To extend the plumber analogy a little further, however, they are of exactly the right shape, length, thickness, bore, even ring, for the job in hand. And inasmuch as they do point outside the play, it is as part of a dramatic
technique that aims, above all, to involve the active imagination of the spectator, liberating it rather than imprisoning it with the shackles of reference.


2. These manuscripts and typescripts are fully discussed in S. E. Gontarski, Beckett’s “Happy Days”: A Manuscript Study (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Library Publications, 1977).

3. These production notebooks are preserved in the Library of the University of Reading, England. The two German notebooks for Beckett’s 1971 Berlin production are MS. 1396/4/10 and MS. 1227/7/8/1. The Oliver Edwards quotation and the other references noted here are found in the notebook for Beckett’s production of Happy Days at the Royal Court Theatre in London in June 1979, Reading University Library, MS. 1730.


5. Most of the French quotations were identified by Beckett in a reply to questions by James Knowlson, n.d. The Victor Hugo quotation, which replaces Charles Wolfe’s verse, was located by Richard Admussen in the Chants du Crépuscule. All the quotations are listed in the notes to a bilingual edition, Happy Days. Oh les beaux jours, ed. J. Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).


12. The Browning quotation was identified by Gontarski, Beckett’s “Happy Days,” p. 69.

13. These, and other, possible literary allusions are suggested in Gontarski, ibid., chap. 6, and in the notes to J. Knowlson’s bilingual edition of Happy Days.

14. This first draft is preserved in a manuscript notebook of Beckett’s entitled “Eté 56” in Reading University Library, MS. 1227/7/7/1. It is discussed in Gontarski, ibid.


18. Ibid., p. 30.
21. Ibid., p. 46.
22. Ibid., p. 33.
23. Ibid., p. 41.