BECKETT’S *HAPPY DAYS* AND DANTE’S *INFERNO*,
CANTO 10

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This paper investigates a previously unexplored source for Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* in Dante’s *Inferno* to shed new light on Winnie’s bizarre world of blazing sun and hellish heat. Her insistence on the phrase “old style,” is a clue that leads first to *Purgatory* 24 and then to *Inferno* 10. In the latter canto, Dante speaks to Farinata and Cavalcante. Striking similarities indicate that this canto provides both a structural framework and thematic context for Beckett’s play.

Samuel Beckett’s interest in Dante, and in particular, the *Divine Comedy* is well known. Not until relatively recently, however, has the connection between the authors been deeply explored in book-length studies. Daniela Caselli begins her book, *Beckett’s Dantes*, by stating simply, “Dante’s presence is pervasive in Beckett studies.” This, of course, is a direct result of the author’s many references to Dante in his essays, poems, plays and novels. From the early days at Trinity College when he read the *Divine Comedy* with the help of his Italian tutor Beckett did not hide his admiration for Dante either in his academic writing or his fiction. Mary Bryden, in her essay “No Stars without Stripes: Beckett and Dante” points out an early example of the young Beckett’s close scrutiny of Dante’s poetry. Bryden explains that he was interested in number-games and particularly fascinated with the meticulous numerical structure and symmetry of the *Comedy*. Beckett comments on this remarkable feature in his essay “Dante…Bruno. Vico. Joyce” pointing out the critical importance of the number three in a work that consists of three books with thirty-three cantos written in three-line rhymes. Beckett himself, at Joyce’s suggestion, constructs a miniature number-game in the title to his essay. Each period between the names stands for 100 years, giving the chronologically ordered title a symbol marking the distance in time between its four authors.
Scholars have identified many direct references and other subtler allusions to Dante in Beckett’s work. Some are as obvious as the title of his essay on Joyce and “Dante and the Lobster,” the first story of More Pricks than Kicks. As is well known, he names the protagonist of this work and of the novel that precedes it Belacqua after the indolent figure in Dante’s Purgatory. Both Daniela Caselli and Jean-Pierre Ferrini find in Belacqua an important starting point for investigating the link between the two authors.

Daniela Caselli’s book begins with a refreshingly basic question, “But what does Dante do in Beckett and for Beckett?” The author limits herself to the prose works, the novels for the most part, to develop her argument that studying Beckett’s use of Dante can not only help the reader understand these works but also sheds new light on how intertextuality shapes meaning. Although Caselli does not focus on the theater and only mentions the play Happy Days once without linking it directly to the Comedy, the question at the beginning of her book can be posed meaningfully in regard to this play.

Jean-Pierre Ferrini, early in the first chapter of his book Beckett et Dante locates the entirety of Samuel Beckett’s work somewhere between Dante’s Purgatory and Inferno. The indetermination of this in-between space is what makes Beckett’s work universal according to Ferrini. Furthermore, he believes that Belacqua embodies this same space in which Beckett’s other creatures exist and suffer. Ferrini devotes the third chapter of his book to him and to a line-by-line analysis of his short exchange with the pilgrim in the fourth canto of Purgatory. He attributes much importance to Belacqua’s famous question, “O frate, andar in sù che porta?” “O brother, what’s the use of going up?” (4.98-135) which he uses to guide his analysis and comparison with Beckett’s Belacqua as he appears in Dream of Fair to Middling Women.

In his brief analysis of Happy Days, Ferrini first compares Winnie and Willie to Dante’s frozen damned in Inferno 32. Here in the ninth circle, the lowest depth of hell, the damned are entombed to various degrees in the frozen lake of Cocytus and Dante is warned not to step on their heads. Ferrini then moves on to Winnie’s use of the phrase “sweet old style” and traces it to Dante’s conversation with the thirteenth-century poet Bonagiunta in Canto 24 of Purgatory in which the phrase dolce stil nuovo (sweet new style) was coined (Ferrini 120; Singleton, 570). The French text of the play Oh les beaux jours allows for a play on words associating le doux vieux style (the sweet old style) and