

Chapter 4

Bun-Ching Lam's and Samuel Beckett's *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs*:

Music, Image, Text

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In 1934 Samuel Beckett's friend George Reavey approached him with a proposal to publish his poems. Reavey had set up a small publishing enterprise in Paris called Europa Press which was closely allied with the etching studio Atelier 17, founded by Stanley William Hayter in 1927. While a student at Cambridge, Reavey had co-founded an interdisciplinary review called *Experiment* with the poet, William Epsom, and painter, Julian Trevelyan. Reavey was particularly interested in artists from Atelier 17 illustrating his editions, and he had used images by John Buckland Wright and Pavel Tchelitchev. By all accounts, Reavey was a powerhouse of energy. In a letter dated March 1935, Beckett describes Reavey as 'full of translations, anthologies, adaptations & centos & transactions of every kind'.¹ That same year, Beckett's long poem *Echo's Bones* was published by Europa Press. Reavey was keen that Beckett allow the text to be illustrated by artists from Atelier 17, and indeed Stanley William Hayter submitted engravings for the edition.² However, as Reavey explains in an interview with James Knowlson: 'Beckett didn't like the idea' and so 'it came out very plainly, without

¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, vol. I: 1929–1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, 2009), p. 260.

² Judith Wechsler, 'Illustrating Samuel Beckett: The Issue of the Supererogatory', *Art Journal*, 52/4 'Interactions between Artists and Writers' (Winter 1993), pp. 33–40, p. 40, n. 8.

illustration'.³ Hayter did subsequently illustrate one of Beckett's texts. In 1974 an edition of *Still* was published by M'Arte Edizioni in Milan with Beckett's text (written especially for the edition) in English and Italian, translated by Luigi Majno. It was published in loose signatures with three colour etchings and three black and white etchings by Hayter. The images depict a human head, fractured into planes of graded tones, or formed of fluid lines. Beckett took a close interest in the development of Hayter's images, visiting his studio to suggest that Hayter move away from representation and toward abstraction. As Lois Oppenheim explains: 'he came by frequently and followed progress on each plate with acute interest. He was disturbed at one moment by the depiction of a head as it had too much character and he wanted it to be an anonymous head'.⁴

Writing of the theatre, and in particular of set design, Beckett emphasized to George Duthuit that he did not 'believe in collaboration between the arts'.⁵ Beckett's dislike of such collaboration stemmed from an acute awareness of the specific possibilities that each art provides, and the concern that by subordinating one art within the realm of the other, both will be weakened. In the same letter to Duthuit he argues for 'a theatre reduced to its own means, speech and acting, without painting, without

³ *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Summer 1977, no. 2, p. 10.

⁴ Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor, 2000), p. 186.

⁵ Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 3 January 1951, trans. George Craig, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, eds. George Craig and Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et. al. (Cambridge, 2011), p. 218.

music, without embellishments'.⁶ Beckett was interested in what each art could do, on its own terms, and was wary of 'any parallel between the two arts'.⁷ Later in his letter to Duthuit, Beckett emphasizes the priority of the text in theatre for, as he argues, 'the setting has to come out of the text, without adding to it'.⁸ Breon Mitchell contrasts Beckett's 'well-known unwillingness to allow directors and set designers to take liberties with his texts' with his generosity towards visual artists who wished to link their images with his writing.⁹ He reminds us of James Knowlson's observation that Beckett was also very open to musicians: 'his attitude to musicians who wanted to adapt his work was much freer than it was to stage or film directors wishing to do the same thing'.¹⁰

Throughout his writing Beckett demonstrated a great affinity with the visual image and a perceptive understanding of the nature of the visual arts. Beckett's critical writing on art in, for example, 'La Peinture des van Velde', 'Les Deux Besoins' and 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit' attest to an intense engagement with the

⁶ Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 3 January 1951, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, eds. Craig and Fehsenfeld et. al., p. 218.

⁷ James Lord, *Some Remarkable Men* (New York, 1996), p. 289. Cited in Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Michigan, 2000), p. 211, n. 83.

⁸ Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 3 January 1951, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, eds. Craig and Fehsenfeld et. al., p. 218.

⁹ Breon Mitchell, 'Six Degrees of Separation: Beckett and the *Livre d'Artiste*' in Lois Oppenheim, ed. *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts and Non-Print Media* (New York and London, 1999), pp. 173–198, p. 191.

¹⁰ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* (London, 1996), p. 577.

nature of art and the role of the artist.¹¹ Friendship was key to Beckett's engagement with contemporary art – as Judith Weschler attests, 'artists were among Beckett's closest friends'¹² – and he counted Jack Yeats, the van Velde brothers, Avigdor Arikha, Stanley William Hayter, and Genevieve Asse among those. It is not surprising, then, that Beckett's first engagement with the *livre d'artiste* was through his good friend the artist Avigdor Arikha with whom he collaborated on an edition of *Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien* in 1958. Yet whether he was working with close friends such as Arikha, renowned artists such as George Baselitz, or giving permission to little known art students such as Deltas Henke, Beckett's texts collaborate with the vibrant and diverse imagery of these artists to produce limited-edition works of great power. One of the most notable of these is the book *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs*.

In her article 'Illustrating Samuel Beckett' Weschler makes a distinction between the illustration of a text and the production of a play, arguing that 'illustration is unlike the production of a play, which is the fulfilment of an intention, but rather more like setting a work to music: the text does not necessarily need it.'¹³ What is immediately striking about *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* is that it combines word, image and music in a collaboration of the arts in which the text of Beckett's poems are transformed into songs composed by Bun-Ching Lam, which are then translated into images of the score or musical notation by the composer, which accompany Beckett's text. Image, music, and text combine to produce an edition of exceptional beauty.

Writing on *Contemporary Illustrated Books: Word and Image 1967–1988*, Donna Stein

¹¹ See Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohen (London, 1983).

¹² Judith Wechsler, 'Illustrating Samuel Beckett: The Issue of the Supererogatory', *Art Journal*, 52/4 'Interactions between Artists and Writers' (Winter 1993): pp. 33–40, p. 33.

¹³ Wechsler, 'Illustrating Samuel Beckett', p. 33.

characterizes the diverse sources from which the *livre d'artiste* can develop, explaining that they:

may consist of works that illustrate pre-existing, already published texts; they may represent a collaboration between artist and writer on previously unpublished material – or on a text specially written for the purpose of such collaboration – and, as such, are especially important as first editions; or they may be the artist's illustration of his or her own original written material.¹⁴

Of these four possibilities outlined by Stein, *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* fulfils two. Lam's etchings for the book provide a visual counterpoint to Beckett's poems, which had already been published in both English and French. Her etchings also illustrate her own original material, the 'Four Beckett Songs' that she composed in 1980.

The deluxe edition of *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* takes the shape of an isosceles triangle (fig. 4.1). Its cover is formed of 8 wooden slats side by side, the front stained green, the back, red, each side measuring 43 cm. The tip of the front and back covers is a triangle of ebony, its shape a synecdoche for the book itself. The binding, by Jean de Gonet of Paris, is detailed in two semi-circles of red leather embossed with a diamond pattern.¹⁵ At the centre of the semi-circles is ribbon of fawn leather, embossed with a square pattern, at the centre of which are six black threads which overlay the black leather of the spine, which measures 37 cm. The binding of *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* is an excellent example of de Gonet's work which has been hailed as 'a revolution in traditional modern binding' and is distinctive by its 'visible sewing structures, the use of woods and unusual materials'.¹⁶ Stein underlines the importance

¹⁴ Donna Stein, *Contemporary Illustrated Books: Word and Image 1967–1988* (New York, 1991), p. 7.

¹⁵ See *An Exhibition of Bookbindings by Jean de Gonet* (New York, 1987)

¹⁶ Federico E. Livio Macchi, *Jean de Gonet: reliures peintes* (Paris, 1996) quoted in <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/Results.aspx?SearchType=AlphabeticSearch&ListType=CoverMaterial&Value=104>

of the *livre d'artiste* for the development of twentieth-century bookbinding:

Bookbinders have always been specialists; but it is the artists of the twentieth century who have given the binding of the contemporary illustrated book that status of artistic expression, finding ways to adapt the requirements of bindings to their own particular expressive modes.¹⁷

This edition is housed in a slip case by Atelier Dermont-Duval (Paris) and contains an extra suite of etchings printed in red on Chinese paper. The texts and images of this edition are printed in purple and green ink on 14 sheets of heavy deckle-edged paper handmade at the press. The endpapers are black. *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* was published by Gunnar A. Kaldewey, New York, 1986. The 10 deluxe copies are signed by Samuel Beckett and by Bun-Ching Lam. Other editions of the book are not signed by Beckett, but by the composer alone. They include 10 special copies on heavy paper with an extra suite of etchings. These are ‘bound in leather with relief printed covers’.¹⁸ The regular edition, which was supposed to comprise 50 copies, but of which only 30 were made, was bound by Christian Zwang of Hamburg in grey paperboards with relief printed covers’.¹⁹ It comes in a rectangular box, with the spine lettered in silver.²⁰ All of the editions include a 45 rpm record of Beckett’s poems set to music by Bun-Ching Lam, for which the composer won first prize in the 1980 Aspen music festival.

Gunnar Kaldewey is well-known for the quality and diversity of the artist’s books that he publishes. He set up his handpress in Poestenkill, upstate New York in 1985 and since then has produced over 60 artist’s books all of which he typesets and prints himself. Among the authors of his editions are Hölderlin, Burroughs, Celan,

¹⁷ Stein, *Contemporary Illustrated Books*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Wulf D. von Lucius, *Making Artist Books Today: A Workshop in Poestenkill, New York, August 18–23* (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 47.

¹⁹ Von Lucius, *Making Artist Books Today*, p. 47.

²⁰ Von Lucius, *Making Artist Books Today*, p. 47.

Beckett, Duras, Heaney and Joyce. Kaldewey describes the role of the publisher and printer in his collaboration with writer and artist, explaining how:

the ideas of the artist and writer merge with my own and a fermentation shapes the execution. Each of us offers our own experience; the visual, the literary, the technical. Through the back and forth, the book slowly gains its final shape. At this stage I like to be the artisan – papermaker or printer. It gives a mutual feeling to the project – no competition – and in a joint venture we try to raise the quality as much as we can. The stronger the personalities, the more original the ideas, the more unconventional the book will be.²¹

He has worked closely with Bun-Ching Lam on a number of artist's books such as Hölderlin's *Nachtgesänge* (2000) which includes 4 etchings and a composition by Lam; *Confucius, The Great Learning, with an English translation by Ezra Pound* (2000–01) which includes calligraphy by Lam and line drawings by Swiss artist Not Vital; and *Wolken/Clouds* (1982), printed on aluminium sheets in which images of a cloud formation emerge from the blue letterpress on a black letterpress background. The image is further emphasized by over-spraying in white, pink and blue ink. The book was bound by Zwang in polished aluminium covers with hinges of stainless steel.²² The text of the book was written by Kaldewey and was set to music in three choral works also called *Wolken* by Lam in 1987, 1990 and 1994 respectively. At the premiere of the first composition in Seattle in September, 1987, Lam dropped a copy of the book from a helicopter, through the clouds.²³

Bun-Ching Lam is a prize-winning composer and conductor based in New

²¹ Gunnar A. Kaldewey, 'Crossing Borders – The New Aesthetics in Artists Books', in von Lucius, *Making Artist's Books Today*, p. 42.

²² Barbara Mittler, Exhibition Lam Bun-Ching and Gunnar A. Kaldewey: 'Creative Couples, Music and Books', <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/conf/kaldewey2009/p01.htm>. Accessed 3 May 2011.

²³ Barbara Mittler, Exhibition Lam Bun-Ching and Gunnar A. Kaldewey, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/conf/kaldewey2009/p01.htm>. Accessed 3 May 2011.

York and Paris. She was born in the Macao region of China in 1954, and studied piano performance in Hong Kong. There, she became aware of a dissonance between interpretation and creation, describing how she ‘became discontented with always being the interpreter. After playing so much music of other composers, I wanted to write my own music’.²⁴ Her work is characterized by a subtle conjunction between the Chinese and European music traditions in which the Western classical tradition is inflected with the sound of pentatonic scales and the melodies of folk music.²⁵ Barbara Mittler has lauded the music for ‘its sensibility to instrumentation, the creation of interesting and new timbre effects, for its inventiveness in terms of rhythm, and its deliberate and effective use of sounds and silences’.²⁶ This characterization of Lam’s aesthetic has much in common with Beckett’s own, particularly with its attention to instrumentation, inventiveness and silence.

Lam has described her music as ‘useless music’ and in doing so references the Chinese Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu (360 BC) whose writing is characterized by sceptical perspectivalism and who proposed the idea of ‘efficacious uselessness’. As historian John S. Major explains, ‘an important motif in the *Chuang-tzu* is based on the proposition that “uselessness” [...] is the key to survival in man’s turbulent and

²⁴ Bun-Ching Lam interviewed by Esther Sugai, ‘Chinese Composer writes “Useless Music”’, *The Journal of Seattle/King Country’s Asian Communities*, 13/5, 5 March, 1986, p. 6. Lam went on to study composition at the University of California, San Diego, moving to teach in Seattle once she had earned her PhD. She is currently resident composer at the Macao Orchestra, and has held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as residencies with the Rockefeller Foundation. She is a conductor for the Cosmopolitan Orchestra of New York, and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra/Macao Chamber Orchestra.

²⁵ Sugai, ‘Chinese Composer writes “Useless Music”’, p. 6.

²⁶ Barbara Mittler, ‘National Styles and Asymmetries of Perception—Transculturality in Bun-Ching Lam’s Music’, lecture given at the symposium *Creative Couples: Transcultural Media*, Heidelberg University, 26–28 October 2009.

unsatisfactory world, and that, conversely, the possession of qualities or talents conventionally thought to be useful [...] frequently brings injury and grief to the possessor.’²⁷ Lam explains her interpretation of Chuang Tzu’s philosophy in the context of her music, describing how ‘useless music has no function; it’s not created for any purpose. It’s just there; it exists by itself. [...] I don’t make specific statements with my music.’²⁸

There is clearly an affinity between Lam’s aesthetic and the ‘secular quietism’ (as Chris Ackerley puts it) that has been ascribed to Beckett.²⁹ In the *Dream Notebook*, as John Pilling alerts us, Beckett notes two quotations from Thomas à Kempis: ‘Qui melius scit pati majorem tenebris pacem. [Iste est victor sui et dominus mundi, amicus Xti et haeres coeli]’ which Pilling translates as ‘He who knows the secret of enduring will enjoy the greatest peace’. [Such a one is master of himself and of the world, a friend of Christ and an heir of heaven].³⁰ The second quotation is ‘Nolle consolari ab aliqua creatura magnae puritatis [, et internae fiducia] signum est’ [‘To desire no comfort from any creature is a sign of great purity’].³¹ Both quotations are contained in a letter by Beckett to Thomas McGreevy dated 10 March 1935 in which Beckett explains how they ‘seemed to be made for me and which I have never forgotten. [...] But they all conduced to the isolationism that was not to prove very splendid. [...] An

²⁷ John S. Major, ‘The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif’, *Philosophy East and West*, 25/3 (July, 1975): pp. 265–79, p. 265.

²⁸ Bun-Ching Lam interviewed by Esther Sugai, ‘Chinese Composer writes “Useless Music”’, *The Journal of Seattle/King Country’s Asian Communities*, 13/5, 5 March 1986, p. 6.

²⁹ Chris Ackerley, ‘Samuel Beckett and Thomas A Kempis: The Roots of Quietism’, in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui: Beckett et la religion*. p. 84.

³⁰ John Pilling (ed.), *Beckett’s Dream Notebook* (Reading, 1999), p. 85. The quotation comes from Kempis II, iii.

³¹ Pilling (ed.), *Beckett’s Dream Notebook*, p.85. The quotation comes from Kempis II, vi.

abject self-referring quietism indeed'.³² The ambivalence expressed by these comments is evidenced in works such as *Waiting for Godot* in which the tension between activity and passivity, between the desire to go and the desire to wait, is explored with nuance and humour. Anne Atik recounts Beckett's response to John Keats's letters in the 1970s, in particular his exploration of ideas of 'negative capability', describing how Beckett identified closely with Keats's attitude:

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.³³

Bun-Ching Lam set Beckett's *Quatre Poèmes* to music in 1980, writing for soprano, clarinet, violin and percussion in a series of 4 songs that last for 9 minutes. The clarinet comprises E-flat, B-flat and Bass clarinets, performed by one player, and the percussion (also one player), comprises five temple blocks, five wood blocks, snare drum, five tom-toms, hi-hat, three suspended cymbals, marimba, xylophone, vibraphone and tubular bells.³⁴ The recording that is contained in the *livre d'artiste* is performed by Thomasa Eckert (soprano), and musicians of the New Performance Group, Seattle. Of Beckett's poems, Lam chose 'Dieppe' (1937), 'je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse/my way is in the sand flowing' (1947), 'que ferais-je sans ce monde/what would I do without this world' (1947) and 'je voudrais que mon amour

³² Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. I: 1929–1940*, eds. Dow and Fehsenfeld et. al, p. 257.

³³ Anne Atik, *How it Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (London, 2001), pp. 70–1.

³⁴ Bun-Ching Lam, *Four Beckett Songs: for Soprano, Clarinet, Violin & Percussion* (New York, Subito Music, Notevole Music Publishing, nd.).

meure/I would like my love to die' (1947), using the English text as the lyric. The composer describes how she chose the poems because their meaning resonated with her concerns, and also because, on a practical level, they were the appropriate length for her composition. She was, at the time, resident at the Aspen Music Festival and School and had just nine weeks to work on the composition. She explains how 'I chose the poems as a set as I thought they were just the right length, and work beautifully together.'³⁵ At this time Bun-Ching Lam had no contact with Beckett and was working solely on the resonances between words and music within the context of her own practice. The idea of the *livre d'artiste* was also not on the horizon at this point. It is only after she met Gunnar Kaldewey at Aspen and developed a collaboration with him that the idea of an artist's book based on her composition and Beckett's poems arose. At this point Kaldewey wrote to Beckett for his permission to use the poems, sending the writer a recording of Lam's music. Happily, Beckett agreed. Bun-Ching Lam met Beckett in Paris when both composer and writer signed the deluxe copies.

'Dieppe', the first of the *Quatre Poèmes*, was inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin's *Der Spaziergang*. It was first published in *Les Temps modernes* in November 1946 (almost ten years after its composition), and is described by Pilling as the 'most object-oriented and impersonal' of Beckett's poems written at this time, 'although the shadow of a figure survives even in the absence of a personal pronoun'.³⁶ The figure is more clearly present in the other three poems of *Quatre Poèmes*, all written in 1947. In the years that intervened between both compositions Beckett had been tremendously productive, writing *Watt*, *Mercier and Camier*, a range of poems, short prose texts, critical pieces and his first complete play, *Eleutheria*. These three poems—'je suis ce

³⁵ Email correspondance between Tubridy and Bun-Ching Lam, 4 May 2011.

³⁶ John Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 157.

cours de sable qui glisse/my way is in the sand flowing’, ‘que ferais-je sans ce monde/what would I do without this world’, and ‘je voudrais que mon amour meure/I would like my love to die’, were first published in English in *Transition Forty-Eight* in June 1948, and the original French versions in *Gedichte* in 1959.³⁷ The poem, ‘my way is in the sand flowing’, concerns issues of transience and the passing of time. An image of the figure ‘harrying fleeing’ contrasts with the ‘peace’ that is evoked when the figure ‘may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds’ and live in a liminal space—not unlike that of the protagonist of *The Unnamable*—‘the space of a door / that opens and shuts’.³⁸ The next poem, ‘what would I do without this world’, is an unpunctuated and unrhymed sonnet with nine lines in the octet and, as Ruby Cohen explains, in ‘traditional sonnet habit, the octet asks a question that is answered in the sestet’.³⁹ Like so many of Beckett’s works, the speaker of the poem articulates a need ‘for another’ while meditating on the impossibility of an encounter while ‘far from all the living’ in an existence predicated on ‘the ignorance of having been’.

The final poem, ‘I would like my love to die’ is a succinct response to W. B. Yeats’s sonnet ‘He wishes his beloved were dead’. With concise imagery that recalls Ezra Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’, Beckett’s minimal four-line poem conjures a sense of loss palliated by the act of mourning. In her composition Lam uses the text of the (1963) Grove edition, *Poems in English*. In this edition, Beckett translated the last line of the poem, ‘pleurant celle qui crut m’aimer’ as ‘mourning the first and last to love me’. Beckett inscribed a copy of this edition and sent it to his friend, Kay Boyle. On reading the poem, she disagreed with his translation and sent it back to him asking that he translate the line more accurately. Beckett returned the book to Boyle, crossing

³⁷ Ruby Cohen, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor, 2001), p. 157.

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Selected Poems 1930–1989*, ed. David Wheatley (London, 2009), p. 57.

³⁹ Cohen, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 158.

out the published translation and writing a new one: ‘mourning her who thought she loved me’.⁴⁰ This version is included in the 1977 *Collected Poems in English and French* by Grove Press, and in the more recent Faber edition. The first translation ‘mourning the first and last to love me’ lends credence to critics such as Harvey who argue that the poem was written in response to the suffering that Beckett’s mother was experiencing as a result of Parkinson’s disease. The second translation (which is closer to the French original) – ‘mourning her who thought she loved me’ – presents a far greater sense of ambivalence about the nature of the loved one, though both translations ‘impart a continuity that contrasts with the implied transience of mortal love’.⁴¹

Bun-Ching Lam’s music has been described as ‘elegant, restrained stretches of time in which one feels suspended and where time stops. Her compositions with text achieve that delicate balance of literalism and abstraction; she colors the words in just the right way, but the music is never merely a background’.⁴² Lam’s ‘Beckett Songs’ have a considerable affinity with the music Morton Feldman wrote for Beckett’s ‘neither’ in 1976. In a parallel movement of similarity, lines from Beckett’s poem ‘my way is in the sand flowing’ – ‘my peace is there in the receding mist / when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds / and live the space of a door / that opens and shuts’ – prefigure lines from ‘neither’, written almost 50 years later – ‘to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow / from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither / as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently

⁴⁰ Conrad H. Schoeffling, Special Collections Librarian, Long Island University, <http://www2.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/sc/3poems.htm>. Accessed April 2011.

⁴¹ Cohen, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 157.

⁴² Sugai, ‘Chinese Composer writes “Useless Music”’, p. 6.

close, once away turned from gently part again’.

The first song, ‘Dieppe’, begins with a quiet articulation of violin, punctuated by percussive sounds resembling water dropping into a pool. The voice of the soprano begins, low and slow, gradually rising to a clear, attenuated rendition of the poem, like a thread drawn out: ‘again the last ebb / the dead shingle / the turning then the steps / towards the lights of old’. The second song, ‘my way is in the sand flowing’ has a greater sense of urgency. It opens with a soft snare underpinned by a clear clarinet. The music ascends, and re-ascends, building up a tension which is ably exploited by the interplay between soprano and clarinet, joined by violin, particularly in the rendition of the line ‘on me my life harrying fleeing’. The two stanzas of the poem are divided by a brief cacophony that releases the tension built in the first stanza. The second stanza opens low and quiet, but builds swiftly to a crescendo with the line ‘when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds’ which is underpinned by a flurry of percussion followed by a pause as the clarinet holds its note. The last two lines of the stanza return the music to calm and stasis, a sense of arrival. The song ends with the soft sounding of cymbals, brief percussion, then silence.

The third song begins abruptly with percussion and violin in urgent discord, punctuated almost immediately by the voice of the soprano demanding ‘what would I do without this world faceless incurious’. The soprano interjects declamation into her song, further emphasizing the urgency, and generating a sense of rupture when she speaks phrases that correspond with the end of lines 2, 3 and 6 of the first stanza, and the single word: ‘together’ followed by line 4 of the second stanza. The spoken moments of the song generate a parallel text within the music; taken together, these phrases combines to create a new sense: ‘where every instant’ [...] of having been / [...] together [...] / [...] where the murmurs die / [...] / in a convulsive space’. Lam’s

intervention generates a new voice within the text, subtly responding to the sense of Beckett's poetry. The second stanza of the song opens quietly, building up, line by line, a tension that explodes with the forceful, almost angry, declamation of Beckett's fourth line. The last two lines of the song are sung quietly in a high register, accompanied briefly by a few notes from the clarinet. Lam's distinctive articulation of the line 'in a convulsive space', and the piano dynamic of the final couplet, lends weight to a critical debate between Lawrence Harvey and Ruby Cohen about the focus of the sestet of the poem in which Harvey argues that 'in a convulsive space' is the most important line, whereas Cohen asserts the primacy of the 'climactic final rhyming couplet': 'among the voices voiceless / that throng my hiddenness'.⁴³ The fourth song opens with the sound of single chimes emulating, perhaps, a church bell. The haunting atmosphere is emphasized by the single note of the violin, held for 15 seconds, followed by silence. The voice of the soprano enters into the silence, singing 'I would like my love to die'. The violin and chimes join her as she sings, with a sense of peaceful resolution, the subsequent three lines of Beckett's poem. The song closes with a contemplative movement between the clarinet, violin and chime.

Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs contains both English and French versions of Beckett's poems. The second page of the book opens with the French text of 'Dieppe' below which its date of composition (1937) is noted. The English text is printed in purple ink on page 3, justified right and introduced by the numeral 1, unlike the French version. The opposite page features a triangular shaped etching within which five green lines undulate, echoing the sense of Beckett's poem. These are the lines of Lam's score for the subsequent song. The notes are clearly legible, and below, Beckett's text – 'my way is in the sand flowing' – is hand written by the composer. In

⁴³ Cohen, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 159.

a minor, or supplemental, movement of the interaction between word and image that foregrounds the materiality of the medium, close inspection reveals the ‘s’ of ‘is’ to be printed backward. This draws our attention to the process of etching whereby an image, when written or drawn on the plate, is printed in reverse. To ensure that text is legible, it must, initially, be written in mirror image on the plate. This ‘slip’, further emphasizes how Beckett’s texts have been transformed, or translated into word and music, both elements contained within Bun-Ching Lam’s etchings.

The next two double pages (5–6) and (7–8) feature ‘je suis ce cour de sable que glisse / my way is in the sand flowing’, the English text introduced by the numeral 2. The subsequent double page (9–10) features three elements: A large black numeral ‘3’ followed by a full stop, the whole image measuring 3.4 cm x 3.4 cm. Below this is the date ‘1948’ which corresponds to the date of first publication of the English version of ‘je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse’, ‘que ferais-je sans ce monde sans visage sans questions’ and ‘je voudrais que mon amour meure’ in *Transition Forty Eight* in July of that year. Opposite these numbers is a large oval etching in which are juxtaposed eight fragments of a score. They overlap each other at angles, resembling the cross-hatch pattern of *Foirades/Fizzles*, the *livre d’artiste* that Beckett made with Jasper Johns. The phrase ‘what would I do’ is repeated 3 times, and fragments of the phrase, particularly the word ‘what’ a further three times. The oval image and its angular juxtaposition of elements of musical notation reflects visually the movement of Lam’s composition for the third song, ‘what would I do without this world faceless incurious’ which is characterized, as described above, by urgency and discord.

Pages 11–12 feature the text of song three on the left page, the purple text justified right, opposite which is a green triangular shaped etching, the point of which dovetails with the point of the triangular page. Contained in the triangular form of the

etching are fragments of the score that, for the lines ‘deadlight looking for’ and ‘wandering like me eddying far’, correspond to points of crescendo within the music. The next two pages are a single diamond-shaped piece of paper on which two blocks of text are juxtaposed at angles to each other, that on the left printed in purple ink, that on the right, green. The text is the second stanza of ‘que ferai-je sans ce monde’ which begins ‘que ferai-je comme hier comme aujourd’hui’ on the left, and the first stanza of the English translation, ‘what would I do without this world’ on the right. Across pages 15 and 16 is the single line ‘I would like my love to die’ printed large in black ink, serving as an announcement for the final song of the same name which features on pages 17 and 18, the French text on the left, introduced by the numeral 4, is justified right so that it sits snugly with the fold of the book. Below the text is the date ‘1948’. On the right-hand page is the text of the English version ‘I would like my love to die’. This version maintains the initial translation of the last line ‘mourning the first and last to love me’ discussed above. The book closes with a small triangular etching positioned at the lower half of the triangular page. Within this shape are nine demisemi quavers (a quaver with three tails) under which is written the direction ‘poco a poco’, little by little’ followed by ‘smor’ – an abbreviation of ‘smorzando’ – which means to extinguish or dampen. The words of the book, and its music, fade to silence. As the artist guides our reading out of the book, the lines of the score guide our eyes to the acute edge of the triangular page.

In *The Artist and the Book: 1860–1960*, Philip Hofer argues that the *livre d’artiste* ‘has become a major vehicle for artistic expression [...] in which the artist is not necessarily secondary to the author’.⁴⁴ Beckett’s and Lam’s *Quatre Poèmes/Four Songs* is a testament to Hofer’s position, giving us a work in which the author’s poetry

⁴⁴ Philip Hofer, *The Artist and the Book: 1860–1960* (Boston, 1961), p. 8.

is interpreted through music and image to lend a new perspective to our reading. The book embodies ‘the perfect congruence of form and content, manner and theme’ which characterizes Beckett’s poetry and, indeed, the overall achievement of this *livre d’artiste*.⁴⁵ Stein suggests that ‘some of the most successful illustrated books are unions in which author and artist are contemporaries, but have conceived their contributions separately. When combined, the works seem to become a totality greater than the original parts’.⁴⁶ This is, indeed, the case here.

⁴⁵ John Fletcher, ‘Beckett’s Verse: Influences and Parallels’, *The French Review*, 37/3, pp. 320–31, p. 330.

⁴⁶ Stein, *Contemporary Illustrated Books*, p. 7.