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Humility, Self-Awareness, and Religious Ambivalence:  
Another look at Beckett's 'Humanistic Quietism'

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator describes a couple of 'low types' who visit him and give him 'the low-down on God', as well as 'courses on love, on intelligence' (Beckett, 2010b, 8). In the French text these visitors are 'sales types', dirty types (Beckett, 1953, 18). Since Beckett described himself as a 'dirty low-church P[rotestant]' (2009b, 134), and his earliest vice-exister, Belacqua Shuah, as a 'dirty low-down Low Church Protestant high brow' (2010a, 163), it would seem that the Unnamable's guests are religious and moral educators of the reformed kind. The Unnamable himself, however, is unsure about the value of their preaching:

Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen had they left me in peace. I use it still, to scratch my arse with. Low types they must have been, their pockets full of poison and antidote. (2010b, 8)

This passage neatly sums up Samuel Beckett's deeply ambivalent attitude to religion. While its dogmas may be 'rubbish' and it causes its fair share of problems, aspects of it nevertheless prove useful later on. A glance at Beckett's writing reveals how he repeatedly turned to Christian imagery, language and dispositions: his work contains an abundance of prayers, allusions to scripture, half-remembered hymns and other detritus from the religious life. All of this is well-known, of course, and yet even in acknowledging these references in Beckett's writing the ambivalence itself can get forgotten: Beckett can too easily become a closet mystic or a strident anti-theist. In this article, I want to return to one of his earliest pieces of writing – the 1934 review essay 'Humanistic Quietism' (Beckett, 1984, 68–9) – and offer a commentary that keeps this ambivalence, we might even say cognitive dissonance, about religion firmly in mind.

It might not seem obvious why a text as slender as the two pages of 'Humanistic Quietism' warrants such close scrutiny, and so I will briefly make my case here. The

essay was published in the July-September issue of *The Dublin Magazine* and is a review of *Poems* by Beckett's close friend Thomas McGreevy. Despite its brevity, 'Humanistic Quietism' remains a stubbornly opaque text in which Beckett wilfully frustrates his reader with a dense barrage of obscure references, difficult syntax and a lack of clarity about his aesthetic allegiances. And not only is this short text replete with religious imagery, it emerges from the difference in religious temperament between McGreevy – an outspoken Catholic, particularly in matters of aesthetics – and Beckett, a 'dirty low-church P[rotestant] even in poetry' albeit one who lacked 'the least faculty or disposition for the supernatural' (Beckett, 2009b, 134, 257). Although a number of critics have discussed the review in previous studies, there are still several knots that remain to be untied. In particular, I argue that Seán Kennedy's reading (2005) of the review does not significantly appreciate Beckett's religious ambivalence, and ends up casting him as antagonistic towards Catholicism and therefore surreptitiously critical of McGreevy's poetics. I will propose that Beckett's conflicted attitude towards Christianity – including Catholicism – makes matters more complex.

### Humanism vs. Quietism

The difficulties with this text begin with the title, which seems, as Chris Ackerley points out, 'oxymoronic' (2000, 88). It is difficult to see how 'humanism' could have anything to do with the obscure and almost forgotten heresy of 'quietism' which spread through Spain, Italy, and France in the late seventeenth century. Whereas humanism rests on the belief that the human species is capable of steady improvement in the spheres of morality, material conditions and knowledge, quietism encourages human beings to recognise their worthlessness, impotence, and ignorance, and to submit humbly before God. Moreover, while Beckett had a sustained interest in quietism during the 1930s (Ackerley, 2000; Feldman, 2009; Nixon, 2011, chap. 3), he seems to have had little patience for anything involving humanism. In September 1934, shortly after submitting the review, Beckett told McGreevy that the 'deanthropomorphizations of the artist' constituted the 'one bright spot in a mechanistic age' (2009b, 223). This suggests that Beckett's attribution of 'humanism' to McGreevy may not exactly be a note of praise.

After the Second World War, Beckett had still harsher words to say about the 'human'. In an essay on the paintings of Bram and Geer van Velde, published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1945, Beckett says that 'l'"humain"' is 'un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu'on reserve pour les temps des grands massacres,' 'un mot qu'on se renvoie aujourd'hui avec une fureur jamais égalée' [a term, and no doubt a concept as well, which is reserved for times of great massacres; a word that returns today with an unparalleled anger] (1984, 131, my translation). This term, he adds, has done great damage to the world of art in particular.

McGreevy may have been more enthusiastic about humanism than Beckett, however. In 1943, he wrote an essay on St Francis of Sales, a sixteenth century bishop and writer, in which he describes Francis's humanist education and explains how Francis took Montaigne 'as his model in the matter of literary technique'. According to McGreevy, the humanistic perspective never left Francis, even once he became a bishop:

humanism remained – by instinct and training Francis was, himself, a humanist – but now it was a Christianised humanism and all the more humane for accepting the implications of the Kingdom of God that is within every human being. (1943, 2)

The poem 'Arrangement in Gray and Black', included in *Poems*, is dedicated 'To the memory of a student of François de Sales' (McGreevy, 1934, 55), and it is possible that McGreevy may have spoken to Beckett about the saint and his humanist associations during the 1930s. Then again, McGreevy's Catholicism may have put a limit on his humanism: in his book on Eliot, he praises St Francis – although whether of Sales or of Assisi is not clear – for having 'laughed and not ironically' at the human condition: 'He got rid of his human respect, and was not afraid of making a fool of himself' (1931, 25).

From this evidence, it would seem that Beckett's attribution of 'humanism' to his friend's poetry was faint praise at best. But even if he found aspects of the 'human' problematic, and was unlikely to sign up to a Christian humanism, Beckett may have found a variety of humanism more to his liking. In *The History of Philosophy*, the major source for Beckett's autodidactic explorations of western

thought during the 1930s, Wilhelm Windelband notes how Renaissance humanism ‘reawakened older doctrines of Greek cosmology’, which included thinkers to whom Beckett was sympathetic such as Democritus, Epicurus, the Stoics and the Sceptics (1901, 353). Renaissance humanism informed the work of the English writer Robert Burton, whose explicitly Democritean book *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is frequently excerpted in Beckett’s *Dream* and *Whoroscope* notebooks (Pilling, 1999; UoR MS3000, 84r–85v). Windelband also discusses the Renaissance rediscovery of scepticism, by thinkers such as Sanchez and Montaigne, which instigated fresh doubts about the reliability of the senses: ‘Hence [the] empiricism of the Humanists now also threw itself more upon inner perception, which was universally regarded as much surer than outer perception’ (1901, 376). Given Beckett’s interest in ‘self-awareness’ (1984, 71) in both ‘Humanistic Quietism’ and another review essay from 1934, ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, the humanism of Montaigne would seem a useful historical touchstone. ‘Strenuously as all these [humanist thinkers] urge toward looking at things themselves,’ writes Windelband, ‘outer perception ultimately turns out comparatively empty’ (1901, 376).

Already this ‘inner perception’ is starting to sound like something far more compatible with the silent, contemplative prayer of quietism. Beckett used the term ‘quietism’ a number of times in his correspondence and reviews from the 1930s. He connects the quietist disposition with passages in Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* (Letter to A.J. Leventhal, 7 May 1934, qtd in Nixon, 2011, 55) and in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (‘Proust in Pieces’; 1984, 65), with his cousin’s ‘étrange quadrupède’ [strange quadruped] of a horse (Letter to Morris Sinclair, 27 January 1934, 2009b, 177) and, most importantly, with *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, which McGreevy had recommended to him as a source of solace (2009b, 257). Rachel Burrows’s notes to Beckett’s lectures on André Gide at Trinity College Dublin in 1930, refer to ‘Dostoevsky’s quietism’ (TCD MIC60, 12v) and, in the *Whoroscope* notebook, Beckett mentions ‘quietism oder was’ [or what] in early notes towards the structure of *Murphy* (qtd in Nixon, 2011, 55).

In a narrow historical sense, Quietism refers to a loose group of Catholic mystics in the seventeenth century, the most important being Miguel de Molinos (1628-1697), Madame Guyon (1648-1717) and François Fénelon (1651-1715). They all taught an approach to prayer that emphasised silence, passivity, resignation of the will, and the cultivation of ‘holy indifference’. In the prayer of quiet, a Christian was

supposed to put aside all forms of mental imagery, spiritual striving, rational thought, and devotional exercises such as praying the rosary (Evans, 2009; Choudhury, 2009). Molinos, Guyon, and Fénelon were all persecuted for their teachings by the Catholic Church, and Quietism is still considered heresy today. The major details of Quietist teaching and history are outlined by William Inge in his *Christian Mysticism*, which Beckett read between 1931 and 1932, and which is quoted over several pages of the *Dream* notebook (Pilling, 1999, 97–102). Most importantly for my purposes here, Inge links McGreevy's Christian humanist St Francis of Sales to Quietism, and this may have inspired Beckett's title. After discussing Fénelon's teaching that self-interest must be excluded from love of God, Inge quotes St Francis of Sales: 'the disinterested heart is like wax in the hands of its God' (1899, 237). McGreevy also knew about this connection between his Christian humanist hero and the Quietists, describing Francis's books as being 'a formative influence on the great minds that were then coming to maturity', including Fénelon's (1943, 2).

A broader definition of quietism – without a capital Q – would include all other philosophies or religious teachings that encourage passivity and resignation of the will, and which aim at a state of indifference or mental quiet. Beckett reached this understanding of the term through the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who, in the third volume of *World as Will and Idea*, defines quietism as 'surrender of all volition, asceticism, i.e., intentional mortification of one's own will' and uses it to talk about Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu ascetics as well as Christian ones such as Guyon and Molinos (1909, 3:433). Schopenhauer praised the disposition of all these quietists, while rejecting their individual religious dogmas. His own soteriology also focused on resignation of the will, and he stated that the concerns of 'quietism and asceticism' were 'identical with that of all metaphysics and ethics', and therefore something that philosophers should take more seriously (436). In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, the entry for 'Quietism' is illustrated by a quotation from William Temple:

What is called by the poets apathy or dispassion, by the scepticks indisturbance, by the Molinists quietism, by common men peace of conscience, seems all to mean by great tranquillity of mind. (1755, 1623)

The 'scepticks' here are the ancient Greek Pyrrhonists whose therapeutic philosophy, like those of other the other two Hellenistic schools, Epicureanism and Stoicism, aimed at *ataraxia*: imperturbability of mind. These were also precisely the schools of thought which inspired Renaissance humanists mentioned by Windelband.

'Humanistic Quietism', then, need not be an oxymoron. It might indicate an interest in the life of the mind and the study of the self, as practised by Montaigne as well as Beckett's beloved Burton and McGreevy's hero, Francis of Sales. In the next section, I will argue that the tension between a meliorist humanism and a resignationist quietism is one that Beckett found creatively productive.

### Protestantism, Solipsism, and Humility

Beckett and McGreevy were close friends separated by their difference in religious belief. This has led Seán Kennedy to suppose that 'Humanistic Quietism' is a critique of McGreevy's Catholic poetics. In particular, Kennedy thinks that Beckett was tacitly attacking McGreevy for living in a solipsistic mental world constructed by his own religious belief, and for forming a poetics based on Christian humility rather than individual artistic integrity. While Kennedy's reading is enlightening and useful in many respects, he goes too far in depicting Beckett as a critic of inwardness and humility. Even if Beckett could not stomach the Catholicism of his friend, his ambivalent attitude towards religion means that he still retained a fondness for these two monkish virtues.

Beckett describes how McGreevy 'evolves his poems' from a 'nucleus of endopsychic clarity' (1984, 69). 'Endopsychic' literally means 'in the mind'. Beckett probably took the term from Ernest Jones's *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* that he was reading and taking notes on in 1934 (TCD MS10971/7, 1–20). There, Jones explains a set of mental forces known as the 'endopsychic censor', which 'consists of various social and ethical inhibitions, the effect of which is to prevent the passage into consciousness of the mental processes, comprising the latent content' (1913, 362). Beckett could be using the word in its literal sense, without alluding to Jones, in which case his point is that McGreevy is unusually clear about the workings of his own mind. Alternatively, if he did intend to allude to Jones, then the point is more derogatory: the innermost part of McGreevy's mind, perhaps the subconscious, is very

clear about what needs to be censored and suppressed in order for his Catholic poetry to 'evolve'. Both readings seem plausible, and it is by no means clear which is to be preferred. The same is true of Beckett's statement towards the end of the review that 'For the intelligent Amiel there is only one landscape'. This is a reference to the Swiss poet and philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881), who is best known for his extensive diary writing, published as *Journal intime*. The 'landscape', then, is the terrain of the mind and the self, perhaps what Amiel referred to as 'la conscience de la conscience' (1976, 2:441) [consciousness of consciousness]. As J. C. C. Mays points out, this comparison might not be flattering to McGreevy since it suggests that Beckett thought his poetry 'was in one direction and was relatively colourless; that it drove towards a vacant, nameless consciousness' (1995, 115). But it is not immediately clear that Beckett thought that this exploration of consciousness was a bad thing. In the *Dream* notebook he records a phrase which seems to be of his own coinage: 'plung[e] à la Amiel into the Encyclopaedia of my subject' (Pilling, 1999, 132). Rather than being colourless and dull, the inner world of the aspiring Amiel might be as rich and fascinating as an encyclopaedia (Beckett was an avid reader of encyclopaedias in the 1930s and beyond). Beckett suggests as much several years later in his 1947 poem, 'bon bon il est un pays' [all right all right it is a country]: the mind is compared to 'un pays sans traces' [a trackless land] where 'la tête est muette' [the head is silent] and 'il n'y a rien à pleurer' [there is nothing to lament] (Beckett, 2012, 115, my translation). Ackerley is surely right to say that this poem is both 'a celebration of the realm of the mind and a grumble against the lack of time to explore it fully' (2000, 89). We cannot, therefore, unambiguously assume that Beckett is being critical of McGreevy when he describes his poetry as inward or even solipsistic. It was, after all, the 'Celtic drill of extraversion' that Beckett really despised in poetry (1984, 73).

Kennedy may yet have a point, however. Beckett certainly seems to be more critical of McGreevy in this passage:

To the mind that has raised itself to the grace of humility 'founded' – to quote from Mr McGreevy's *T. S. Eliot* – 'not on misanthropy but on hope', prayer is no more (no less) than an act of recognition. A nod, even a wink. ... This is the adult mode of prayer syntonic to Mr McGreevy, the unfailing salute to *his*

significant from which the fire is struck and the poem kindled (1984, 68; emphasis in original)

Kennedy glosses this as follows:

MacGreevy's salute to God is unfailing: blind faith. And the significant involved – God as conceived in Catholic terms by MacGreevy – is very much MacGreevy's own, his, and is not available to anyone that does not share his faith. Since his faith is unquestioning, God is always what MacGreevy believes him to be; hence prayer is always 'an act of recognition. A nod, even a wink'. MacGreevy sees what he wants to see. (2005, 278)

But even here there is ambiguity. John Pilling (2004, 118) contrasts McGreevy's 'adult mode of prayer' with what Beckett has to say about Rilke's 'childishness' in a review for the *Criterion* in July 1934. There, Beckett criticises Rilke's obsession with the '*Ichgott*': the 'interchangeability of Rilke and God' whereby Rilke sees his own 'fidgets' as something more lofty, such as 'God, Ego, Orpheus and the rest' (1984, 66–7). This conflation of God and self is precisely what Kennedy thinks Beckett is accusing McGreevy of in 'Humanistic Quietism'. But Beckett distinguishes the two poets by calling Rilke a child and McGreevy an adult. The two reviews were written at almost the same time, and so it is not unreasonable to expect Beckett's vocabulary to be consistent. Pilling concludes that McGreevy is superior in Beckett's estimations to Rilke since he 'is operating on the basis that prayer, wheresoever it may be directed, is always orientated outwards' (2004, 118). While I disagree that Beckett casts McGreevy's prayer as outwardly directed, it must be the case that McGreevy is deemed not to be prey to the kind of deluded self-absorption as Rilke.

In the book *T.S. Eliot: A study*, which Beckett quotes, McGreevy claims that a degree of inner separation is actually necessary for the Christian life:

The idea of our being, each one of us, in a prison, isolated from the rest, Mr. Eliot substantiates with a dull passage from F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. I think it was St. Augustine who expressed it most perfectly, at any rate most succinctly: 'The soul of another is dark.' The darkness, incidentally, is only the defect of a quality. For it is our isolation from each other that is our



personal contact with God. ... I mean that the isolation is itself the breath of the Kingdom of God that is in each one of us. (1931, 54–5)

McGreevy would not, therefore, have necessarily seen Beckett's comments on his inwardness as overtly critical. Even Beckett's reference to God as '*his* significant' is not so far from what McGreevy calls his 'personal contact with God'. The passage also demonstrates the shared interests of the two men. Beckett's *Murphy* is preoccupied with precisely the problem that McGreevy discusses here: the tension between a solitude that serves spirituality – although in Murphy's case, not Catholicism but a mixture of Pythagoreanism, Democritean atomism, astrology, and Schopenhauerian quietism – and the need for communion and friendship with others. The narrator of *Murphy* notes the 'unintelligible gulf' between the patients at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat and Murphy, who, despite being a 'seedy solipsist' is ultimately distressed by his exclusion from their 'brotherhood' (Beckett, 2009a, 149, 53, 111). We are also told that 'Murphy believed that there was no dark quite like his own dark' (58): a possible allusion to the Augustinian maxim that McGreevy mentions. When McGreevy is given the chance to review Beckett's poetry, writing in *Ireland To-Day* in October 1937, he turns the tables and points out Beckett's own interest in the inner world: 'Mr. Beckett is cloistered within himself ... He is a poet of the cloistered self on whom experience is an intrusion' (1937, 81). But this is not necessarily a piqued rejoinder to the content of 'Humanistic Quietism'. Benjamin Keatinge (2013, 73) suggests that McGreevy is once again marking the differences between the Protestant and Catholic minds, and compares McGreevy's comments on Beckett to his analysis of the 'New England Eliot' who remained under the sway of Puritanism before his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. But this ignores McGreevy's choice of words: there are few things less Protestant than a cloister, which stands synecdochically for the very thing that was ransacked and dissolved by Europe's reformers. McGreevy then compares Beckett's poetry to 'the temper of *The Imitation [of Christ]*'. Rather than sparring with Beckett, McGreevy was surely trying to demonstrate the affinities that he felt his friend had with certain aspects of the Catholic contemplative tradition, just as he had done when he recommended *The Imitation* to Beckett in 1935. For McGreevy, an interest in inwardness is something he and Beckett share, and which is a healthy part of his Christian faith.

Beckett, however, was both attracted to and wary of inwardness: no doubt because, like Rilke, he was an apostate, and therefore more liable to turn inwardness into a dangerous solipsism than one who ‘always had Jesus for his darling’ (Beckett, 2009b, 257). At times, he is drawn to it, as in the letter in which he approvingly discusses the ‘deanthropomorphizations of the artist’:

Even the portrait is beginning to be dehumanised as the individual feels himself more & more hermetic & alone & his neighbour a coagulum as alien as a protoplast or God, incapable of loving or hating anyone but himself or of being loved or hated by anyone but himself. (2009b, 223)

This anticipates Murphy’s godlike and self-directed *amor intellectualis* (Beckett, 2009a, 69), but it was not long before Beckett started to see the downside of such inwardness. In a much-discussed letter of March 1935, Beckett told McGreevy how he had ‘twisted’ a ‘very baroque solipsism’ from *The Imitation of Christ* which McGreevy had recommended as a possible source of solace for Beckett’s anxiety problems (Beckett, 2009b, 258). Beckett explains that because of his lack of religious belief, he was forced to make a ‘substitution of terms’ and replace Thomas à Kempis’s references to God with his ‘own feathers and entrails’ (257). Consequently he found himself delving into self, instead of seeking communion with the deity. The result was an ‘abject self-referring quietism’, ‘isolationism’ and a ‘crescendo of disparagement of others & myself’ (257–8). This, he adds, was what led him to seek out psychotherapy in 1933. It would seem that one of Beckett’s withering comments about Rilke applies just as much to himself: in his writing there is ‘the overstatement of the solitude which he cannot make his element’ (1984, 66). Most importantly, there is a sense in the letter that Beckett feels his own incurable lack of religious belief to be an obstacle or a hindrance in his search for solace.

Kennedy also argues that Beckett took issue with McGreevy’s belief in the virtue of humility. He points out that the quote from McGreevy’s Eliot book – ‘humility ... founded not on misanthropy but on hope’ – comes from a passage in which Protestantism is roundly criticised:

even in [Eliot's] early poems there were traces of a capacity for self-criticism, for humility, that penitential Catholic virtue, founded not on misanthropy but on hope, that is so utterly alien to the puritanical mind. (McGreevy, 1931, 16)

In quoting this passage, Kennedy argues, Beckett 'takes a subtle swipe at the sectarian discriminations on which McGreevy's aesthetic is based' (2005, 277). According to Kennedy, Beckett was unable to accept McGreevy's Catholic virtue of humility, and replaced it in his aesthetics and ethics with a 'new, more avowedly Protestant, priority – "integrity"' which is 'synonymous with self-reliance' (283). But even if Beckett had problems with Catholicism, he still had a number of 'low church' models of humility at his disposal, not least from his reading of André Gide's *Dostoïevsky* in 1930 which formed the basis of his teaching on Gide at Trinity College Dublin that same year. In a lecture, Beckett explained how Gide was influenced by Dostoevsky, particularly the 'Humilité of Dost[oevsky]' and his 'Renouncement' which 'accommodate[s] complexity with humility' (TCD MIC60, 23). The lecture notes of his student Rachel Burrows give the impression that Beckett was particularly pained to emphasise Gide's Protestant upbringing:

Protestant background which has endured, encouraged by Dost[oevsky].  
Renunciation.

Protestant & iconoclast

Influenced by Protestantism

Protestantism explains most of his characters

Summary ① Protestant & ② Iconoclast – Prot in all that Fr. Prot<sup>ism</sup> implies  
(TCD MIC60, 14, 31, 37, 44)

Gide himself stresses Dostoevsky's vehement dislike of the Catholic Church and says that humility is so embedded in the Russian psyche that it can be found even among souls who lack the Christian faith (Gide, 1923, 226, 15). So despite the arguments of Kennedy – and indeed McGreevy – humility need not be incompatible with Protestantism or even atheism, nor is humility something which Beckett necessarily scorns. In fact, he seems to have appreciated the way in which humility leads Gide to a 'quality of inconclusiveness' and 'integrity of incoherence' (TCD MIC60, 43, 37).

Precisely what Kennedy sees as a replacement for humility – integrity – appears in Beckett's lecture as a product of it.

Two years after writing 'Humanistic Quietism', Beckett would find himself fascinated, 'without knowing why exactly' (Letter to Thomas McGreevy, 5 March 1936; Beckett, 2009b, 319), by yet another low church advocate of humility: Arnold Geulincx, a Flemish Occasionalist philosopher who attempted to reconcile Cartesianism with Protestant Christianity. Beckett 'heartily' recommended Geulincx's *Ethica* to his friend Arland Ussher, in a letter of 25 March 1936, particularly the 'second section of the second chapter of the first tractate, where he disquires on his fourth cardinal virtue, Humility, contemptus negativus sui ipsius' [negative self-contempt] (2009b, 329). Beckett's own transcriptions from the *Ethica* concentrate disproportionately on this section (Geulincx, 2006, 326). While Beckett may have preferred a different kind of humility to his friend McGreevy, it is hard to see him rejecting McGreevy's position on the virtue outright.

In the opaque final paragraph of 'Humanistic Quietism', Beckett explains how humility and self-awareness work might work together:

To know so well what one values is, what one's value is, as not to neglect those occasions (they are few) on which it may be doubled, is not a common faculty; to retain in the acknowledgement of such enrichment the light, calm and finality that composed it is an extremely rare one.

What Beckett seems to be advocating here is self-knowledge that is as free from narcissism as it is from self-loathing. He wants the poet to be sufficiently aware of his or her own worth and priorities, while still being able to see where both these things might be enhanced ('doubled'). And then, once the enhancement ('enrichment') of the poet's worth and priorities has taken place, the poet should still retain his or her initial quasi-quietistic composure of 'light, calm and finality', and not be overthrown by self-aggrandisement. Why? Because this lightness and calm is what 'composed' the enrichment of the poet's value and concerns in the first place. Again, this seems to indicate both self-awareness and humility. My reading of this final paragraph would fit with what Beckett says elsewhere in the review about the union of humility and hope, and the mid-point between the abject publican and the proud Pharisee. It also demonstrates the productive tension of the article's oxymoronic title: humanism

provides the melioristic attitude while quietism provides the humility. Taken together they lead to healthy self-knowledge. In effect, what Beckett is advocating is precisely the opposite of the ‘abject self-referring quietism’ that he would admit to having ‘twisted’ from *The Imitation of Christ* in 1935. Whereas this solipsistic quietism gave rise to both arrogance and self-loathing, a humanistic quietism might bring about a genuine humility coupled with a clear sense of ‘one’s value’ and worth.

### Poetry and Prayer

The Quietist controversy of the seventeenth century was, above all, a controversy about how to pray. It is appropriate then, that Beckett should discuss prayer at several points in ‘Humanistic Quietism’:

All poetry, as discriminated from the various paradigms of prosody, is prayer. A poem is poetry and not Meistergesang, Vaudeville, Fragrant Minute, or any of the other collects for the day, in so far as the reader feels it to have been the only way out of the tongue-tied profanity.

Beckett’s distinction between a true prayer/poem and the ‘collects for the day’ echoes his insistence to Nuala Costello earlier in the year that one of his own poems was ‘a prayer and not a collect’ (2009b, 188). The daily collect is a short, structured prayer said during services in the Anglican and Catholic churches. Beckett seems to be objecting both to the collects’ ritualistic recitation – whereas true prayer is a spontaneous utterance of last resort, the ‘only way out’ – and to their social nature. One of Beckett’s anti-poetic collects, the *Meistergesang*, refers to an inherently social poetic movement from the middle ages. Beckett probably discovered the term in J. G. Robertson’s *History of German Literature*, which forms the basis of his ‘Notes on German Literature’ (TCD MS10971/1). Robertson chides the *Meistersingers* for their ‘artistic barrenness’ and ‘slavery to tradition’, and accuses them of hampering the growth of individual genius and inspiration (1902, 158–61). The reference to ‘Fragrant Minute’ makes a similar point, since it denotes of a popular series of ‘homely little verses’ which appeared in the *Daily Graphic* and later the *Daily Herald* during the 1920s and 1930s (Lang, 1999, 115). The column was written by

Wilhelmina Stitch, a pseudonym of journalist Ruth Cohen, and offered reflection on such subjects as diverse as friendship, gratitude, dreams, public transport, housekeeping, and bereavement. They were insipid daily platitudes designed for mass consumption, and therefore far from Beckett's poetic ideal. Beckett told McGreevy in 1932 that he was 'in mourning for the integrity of a pendu's emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind' (2009b, 134–5). Decades later, in 'Enough', Beckett juxtaposes 'the ejaculations and broken paternosters' (1995, 188): this first word is appropriate to both the aforementioned 'emission' but also to a prayer uttered in an emergency. This is the kind of prayer that Beckett wants, rather than the ritualised, planned, and sociable collect. Furthermore, it is this prayerful attitude that is most important for distinguishing a poem from other kinds of text, over and above the 'paradigms of prosody' that would make such a distinction based on versification or what Beckett calls 'mere metre'.

Beckett then explains that a 'prayer may be "good" in Dante's sense on any note between and inclusive of the publican's whinge and the pharisee's tarantara'. The second half of the sentence is clear enough, since it refers to the parable told by Jesus (Luke 18:9–14) about two men who enter the temple to pray. While the Pharisee gives thanks that he is holier than others, the publican (tax collector) asks God for mercy. Jesus says the publican is more justified in the eyes of the Lord, and warns: 'every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted'. Mary Bryden suggests Beckett is making a 'contrast between inner and outer, between insecurity and bold certainty' and that although 'both tendencies ... may be productive of competent poetry', a 'middle ground between abasement and posturing' is to be preferred (1998, 11–12), which would fit with my conclusions from the previous section.

It is less clear, however, what "'good" in Dante's sense' means. It is possible that Beckett was thinking of Cantos 10–11 of the *Purgatorio*, which describe the ascent of the pilgrim and Virgil to the first terrace of Mount Purgatory, where they hear a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. On this terrace, sinners are being cleansed of their pride: carved into the rock around them are statues of beings who exemplify humility, including the Archangel Gabriel, whose likeness is so convincing that the pilgrim could have sworn 'ch'el dicesse "Ave!"' [that he was saying "Ave!"] (Dante Alighieri,

2003, 160, 10.40), and ‘l’umile salmista’ [the humble psalmist] David (10.65). Since Beckett says that McGreevy’s poems are like a ‘flag dipped in Ave, not hauled down in Misere’ later, referring to Gabriel’s greeting to Mary (Luke 1:28 and 1:48) and David’s Psalm 51, this Canto seems a likely reference point. The paraphrase of the Lord’s prayer, spoken by the proud shades, begins Canto 11, and, as Robert Durling notes, ‘stresses the respects in which [the prayer] enjoins humility’ (Dante Alighieri, 2003, 180). This would fit with the importance of humility in Beckett’s review. Once the shades have finished their prayer, Dante remarks that they were asking for ‘buona ramogna’ [good progress] for themselves, as well as Virgil and the pilgrim; this might be the ‘good’ that Beckett quotes in ‘Humanistic Quietism’. Later on in Canto 11, the pilgrim asks how a soul can ascend to the second terrace if it ‘là giù dimora e qua sù non ascende, / se buona oraziön lui non aita, / prima che passi tempo quanto visse’ [must stay down there and not come up here, if good prayer does not help it, for as long a time as it lived] (11.129–31): this refers to the ante-purgatory where the pilgrim and Virgil had met Belacqua, the character appropriated by Beckett as his alter-ego in *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. When Murphy indulges ‘his Belacqua fantasy’ and imagines himself in the ante-purgatory, in Belacqua’s ‘embryonal repose’, he hopes that ‘no godly chandler would shorten his time with a good prayer’ (Beckett, 2009a, 51). A prayer that is “‘good” in Dante’s sense’ might, then, mean a prayer in which a proud person humbles himself in the aim of furthering his own moral standing in the eyes of God and progressing towards paradise. Translated from Dante’s theological framework into Beckett’s aesthetic one, this would refer to the way a poet seeks ‘enrichment’ through humility and self-knowledge, as I argued in the previous section. But neat as this reading might be, it is difficult to reconcile this with the fact that Beckett says that this ‘good’ prayer can be found ‘between and inclusive of’ the two extremes of the whinging publican and the proud pharisee, rather than simply between them.

## Conclusion

The apparent oxymoron of the title ‘Humanistic Quietism’ is, in the end, apposite for a piece of writing which is so concerned about what lies ‘between’ extremes and which reflects so many of Beckett’s own inner conflicts, both artistic and personal,

from this period. The ‘poison and antidote’ that the narrator of *The Unnamable* finds in religion applies just as well to the constituent concepts of this review: prayer, humanism, quietism, self-awareness, and humility can all threaten creativity just as easily as they can enrich it. The pitfalls are – respectively – ritualism, hubris, abjection, solipsism, and self-loathing, while the potential fruits of these attitudes are spontaneity, radical interior empiricism, inner calm, honesty, and artistic integrity. In treading so narrow a path through this difficult conceptual territory, it is perhaps understandable that Beckett occasionally contradicts himself, as my analysis of Dante’s ‘good’ prayer would suggest he did. As in ‘Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce’, Beckett seems to have resisted the temptation to ‘make a really tidy job of it’, preferring the ‘coincidence of contraries’ in his ‘handful of abstractions’ (Beckett, 1984, 19). And even though I have courted the danger of the ‘neatness of identifications’, this essay cannot pretend to have brought brilliance to all of the murk in ‘Humanistic Quietism’. There remain many, not few, occasions for further ‘enrichment’.

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