

# *Eliot and Beckett's Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation*, by Rick de Villiers

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**Mike Marais**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6794-3976>

Rhodes University, South Africa

[m.marais@ru.ac.za](mailto:m.marais@ru.ac.za)

Rick de Villiers's principal contention in *Eliot and Beckett's Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation* is that the work of both these writers evinces a concern with suffering and one of its possible effects, that is, "the extinction of personality" (2). For this reason, he begins his argument with a discussion of the ambivalent relation of humiliation to humility. In its secular, post-Enlightenment guise, humility is associated with humanist and rationalist notions of individual autonomy, the preservation of human dignity, progress, perfectability, and the betterment of society. So, although humility, in the context of the Enlightenment project's emancipatory narrative, is premised on a recognition of the individual's shortcomings and of universal limitations, it asserts "with equal force the inherent dignity of each individual" (11). From this perspective, humility cannot but eschew humiliation, which is aligned with a divestiture of human dignity and an erosion of notions of progress and human upliftment. What De Villiers shows, however, is that humility and humiliation were once closely affined, with the latter designating the personal act of self-abasement rather than the interpersonal act of degrading another person. Moreover, a corollary of humility, in this Christian tradition, is self-knowledge, which is understood to mean not only knowledge of one's own weaknesses, but also of human fallibility. Indeed, it is the latter which inspires a negative self-regard and, with it, self-forgetfulness and self-lowering. In this connection, De Villiers cites Simone Weil's reflection that "Once we have understood that we are nothing, the object of all of our efforts is to become nothing" (15). When humility and humiliation are aligned, knowledge translates into self-sacrifice.

De Villiers examines Beckett's and Eliot's preoccupation with humility and self-lowering in their writing in the context of this theological tradition, which deems humility a constitutive aspect of subjectivity. Clearly, their concern with humility and



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humiliation places both these writers at variance with the rational humanist conception of individual autonomy and perfectability. At various points in the study, De Villiers deals with Eliot's aversion to humanism, which establishes itself as an alternative to religion, denigrates the supernatural, esteems the notion of progress and human perfectability, and, in its privileging of rationality, establishes "man" as the measure of all things (11–12). In a related vein, he focuses on Beckett's espousal of a form of negative capability, a humanistic quietism. While linked, the two writers' respective understandings of humility and its relation to humiliation differ. For Eliot, humility entails an acceptance of one's place in the divine scheme of things, whereas, for Beckett, it involves an acceptance of the humiliation attendant on the radical imperfection and weakness of the human condition, which is characterised by endemic suffering and can never be transcended. In its latter conception, humility equates with the quietism of negative capability (13).

There is, of course, a strong ethical dimension to De Villiers's argument, which hinges on humility's status as a form of self-sacrifice or self-lowering. That is, ethics, as it is here conceived, involves the I's liberation of itself from itself, or rather from its peevish preoccupation with self, which, in turn, enables it to embody within itself the not-I in its attempts at comprehending the world and relating to others. Rather than reducing it to an object of comprehension, the I acknowledges, even respects, the otherness of the other person. So, for instance, De Villiers argues convincingly that Moran, in Beckett's *Molloy*, comes to recognise the unassimilability of otherness, and develops a measure of negative capability, even though his egotism does eventually return. While I fully agree with this argument, I do feel that it would have made sense to place it in the context of late twentieth-century thinking on ethics, which moves away from the Kantian conception of ethical action as the province of the controlling, autonomous, rational subject to an understanding of it as being grounded in the self's loss of autonomy, its intersubjective, relational construction. If the I is relationally constructed, rather than autonomous, the other enables its very constitution. It is a product of the other and therefore under obligation to it, obliged to care for it. The post-Enlightenment trajectory of this argument has an obvious relevance to De Villiers's arguments on humility, self-abjection and humanism.

Nonetheless, De Villiers's argument on ethics is deeply persuasive, all the more so because it includes a strong concern with aesthetics. The problem for the writer who writes about humility is that it is not a final state, a destination at which an individual may arrive. Rather than a state of being, it is one of becoming that renews itself ceaselessly and is therefore beyond instantiation. A corollary of this argument would be that humility escapes the control of the individual, that it is unknowable. If this is so, the individual cannot choose humility and must instead wait for it to come in the knowledge that if it were to arrive they could not recognise it. And if humility is not recognisable, it is not representable and so exceeds the individual's control.

De Villiers deals at length with Eliot's and Beckett's negotiation of the representational difficulty of thematising humility in their writing. In Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, Celia's martyrdom, the "moment of spiritual agony," as De Villiers terms it, "takes place off-stage and beyond the possibility of self-dramatisation and, indeed, dramatisation itself," which is an admission that "certain experiences are out of the writer's reach" (53–54). More subtly, Eliot's later poetry seeks to perform humility, and De Villiers grapples with the question of whether or not this performance inevitably negates what it performs, whether the poetry, even as it enacts the poet's surrender of self, in fact asserts the ego. What is again at issue here is the subject's aporetic attempt to control humility, which involves precisely the erosion of subjective control.

De Villiers's thesis is nothing less than subtle. A poem like *East Coker*, which evinces the anxieties characteristic of late style, responds allusively and ironically—indeed with embarrassment, even shame—to the portentous arrogance and insularity of Eliot's early work, and may thus be read as a performance of the writer's rejection of his own work. And this is where the aesthetic dovetails with the ethical, in De Villiers's argument. Rather than simply thematising humility, the text enacts self-lowering in its very ontogenesis, in its coming into being. Crucially, though, it does not follow that the work finally instantiates humility, and that humility is therefore something that may be accomplished, attained. Eliot's use of irony implicates the late poetry itself in the shameful of that which it ironises, and so forestalls the complacent distance concomitant on maturity, even as such detachment seeks to install itself. If this self-destabilisation constitutes a performance of humility, it is a humility that is not yet present, which is yet to come.

De Villiers then goes on to show that Beckett's *How It Is* also displays late style's tendency to interrogate the conventions of earlier work, while at the same time inscribing an irreducible ironic doubleness that precludes one from "interpreting the work as either allied with or opposed to the author's earlier writing" (181). Even as it interrogates the earlier work, the "syntax of extreme weakness, penury" that Beckett, in his own words, strove for in this text self-reflexively betrays a scepticism toward its own operations, its own recognisably Beckettian form. As De Villiers puts it, *How It Is* "looks askance both at old foundations and new turnings" (182). Its "syntax of penury" enables resistance to a writing that becomes what it opposes, a "totalising poetics" (182). As with Eliot, what is evident in Beckett's late work, then, is a negotiation, rather than resolution, of the aporia of representing humility.

In conclusion, De Villiers's study is deeply impressive. It is highly original and erudite, yet engaging and, yes, humble. The monograph appears in the *Other Becketts* series, which seeks "to think differently [...] about Beckett's work, to question, that is, even the questions we ask about it" (vi). In my view, it does all this and then a whole lot more.