ON DARK LAUGHTER: LEOPARDI'S AND BECKETT'S HUMOUR

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Summary: The desire not to desire is crucial to Samuel Beckett and Giacomo Leopardi. Beckett explores this theme in *Proust* where Leopardi's poem "A Se Stesso" is thrice quoted. Before citing this poem, Beckett catalogues Leopardi as one of the philosophers who proposed the only impossible solution—the removal of desire—to living. Leopardi expresses the desire of not desiring in his posthumously-collected *Manuale di Filosofia Pratica*. There is thus a fundamental common terrain in Leopardi's and Beckett's existential enquiry. This apparently negative and pessimistic outlook in both authors is a leading thread that has received critical attention. My contention, nonetheless, is that while both Leopardi and Beckett aspire to the ablation of desire, the two authors are neither nihilists nor pessimists. It is through their humour that both Leopardi and Beckett introduce a paradoxical in-between space for desire. The humorous moment conceals repressed desire, albeit it also strives to allow that same characteristic of human fallibility—desire—to be manifested. It is in this dual act that humour in Leopardi and Beckett is inextricably linked to something unsettling, grimacing but also potentially liberating.

Giacomo Leopardi and Samuel Beckett both participate in a remarkably long lineage of dark humour. Their conceptions of the humorous moment are surprisingly similar, for the two writers portray comedy simultaneously to contain both the repression of desire and its attempted release. Humour offers an antidote to their otherwise pessimistic and nihilistic philosophic outlooks. It opens an intermediate space that transforms the nothingness that apparently characterizes the Leopardian and Beckettian *oeuvre* into an irreducible residue. My contention is that through their theory of the comic, Leopardi and Beckett combat what is locked at the crux of their existential enquiry—the urge to suspend desire.

Leopardi succinctly expresses his striving towards the abrogation of desire in "non c'è maggior piacere (né maggior felicità) nella vita che il non sentirla" (*Zibaldone* 6: 3895, 1). In his early monograph *Proust* (1931), Beckett similarly explores the theme of the "ablation of desire" (18), which he equates with what he terms "the suffering of being" (19). In the same monograph, after cataloguing Leopardi as one of the sages who proposed

the only impossible solution to life (the dissolution of desire), Beckett quotes from Leopardi's poem "A Se Stesso": "In noi di cari inganni / non che la speme, il desiderio è spento" (18).

"A Se Stesso" is central in confirming the common ground that exists between Leopardi's and Beckett's respective existential enquiries. Leopardi is among the thinkers inside whose tradition Beckett is positioned, and the negation of desire is the antidote Beckett specifically accepts from Leopardi.

The Italian poet's art, nonetheless, lies in the dialectical process which does not accept totalizing negation as much as it refuses absolute affirmation. It cannot provide the reader with a reassuring synthesis. One of the reasons why it resorts to a theory of the comic is to remain interrogative. Leopardi's denunciation of the human being's anthropocentrism is specifically expressed in his theory of pleasure (*teoria del piacere*), and based on the central paradox which opposes the destruction of natural change to the individual's infinite thirst for *amor proprio*. In his theory of pleasure, Leopardi claims that pleasure and pain are produced from the desire for self-preservation, and thus from desire for *amor proprio*: "E questo amore del piacere è una conseguenza spontanea dell'amor di sé e della propria conservazione" (*Zibaldone* 1: 196). I argue that the above is partially renounced through humour.

This renunciation also famously occurs in "La Ginestra o il Fiore del Deserto" in *Canti* (1831), where Leopardi sets himself the task of recovering an *ultra-filosofia*, a philosophy of resistance to assist his waiting for the end. The main value left is suggested to be solidarity among human beings against the sublime in nature: "contro l'empia natura ... in social catena" (*Canti* 386-87). Alliance in misery is also manifested by Leopardian interlocutors in the *Operette Morali* (1824). Plotino and Porfirio in "Dialogo di Plotino e Porfirio", for instance, agree to forge a pact that prefigures the "social catena" in "La Ginestra". The two dialogists' bond also represents an attempt, on the part of each figure, to resist the burden of human existence through the desire for the other's presence.

The same characteristics that are evident in Leopardi's art are explored by Beckett's particularly macabre humour which fails to submit to complete negativity, implying the opening of a space for desire itself. Indeed, the similarity between Leopardi and Beckett can be extended to their philosophy of resistance to the "suffering of being" (or the conceptually-proximate Leopardian term "*souffrance*"). Both writers admit the irreducibility of human desire and the impossibility of the totalizing power of an absolute closure. Despite being superficially labelled as such, neither

Leopardi nor Beckett is thus nihilistic or pessimistic, and their opening to desire follows the thread that, despite its meandering, runs from one writer to the other.

Massimo Cacciari in *Hamletica* describes the role played by the particularly grim humour of Leopardi and Beckett

Il riso del comico ... non s'abbatte sull'impotenza di caratteri determinati, ma appartiene all'impotenza che segue all'esaurirsi della grande marea delle rappresentazioni, ... È riso pregno di purissimo *aidos*, di vergogna e *pietas*, che *riflette* sull'ultimo giorno, sull'unica 'arte' che ne potrebbe seguire. Che ha *saputo* la fine del pianto tragico e dell'ironia della commedia. Riso *toto corde* leopardiano: 'Quanto più l'uomo cresce ... e crescendo si fa più incapace di felicità, tanto egli si fa proclive e domestico al riso, e più straniero al pianto.' Riso, a sua volta, opposto a ogni sarcasmo, disincantato anzitutto sulla 'potenza' del proprio disinganno- poiché il disincanto nulla trasforma, così come il pensiero di per sé nulla muove. Esso custodisce lo scandalo dell'essere infelice dal ricorrente assalto di ideologie, visioni del mondo, teodicee secolarizzate. Soltanto di opere come quelle di ... Beckett sarà perciò 'lecito' ridere; soltanto loro lo *meritano*. (106)

The two writers combat existentialist stalemates through a murky comedy that threatens to crush even absurdist notions at the root of the philosophy of existentialism. Indeed Leopardi is not simply the precursor, just as Beckett is not only a shrewd interpreter, of the *humour noir* that, as Wolfgang Kayser claims, is essential to the *zeitgeist* of the twentieth century (188). The Leopardian and Beckettian icy chuckle opens a space for positivity in its affirmation of the final inextinguishable quality of desire. Theoreticians of the comic like Immanuel Kant, Jean Paul (Richter), Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire, Henri Bergson, Helmuth Plessner and, above all, Sigmund Freud, contribute to the same tradition which includes Leopardi and Beckett, all emphasizing the shady implications and the terrible potential of gallows humour. The obverse side of this grin, however, is somewhat positive, and it starts to be unveiled in Freud's 1927 essay "Humour."

Kant phrases his theory of laughter in a brilliant short discussion in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) where humour is understood as a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing (196-203). Jean Paul similarly construes the humorous moment as the "inverse sublime," which "annihilates not the individual but the finite by contrasting it with the idea," since "in the face of infinity all is equal and nothing" (250). Nietzsche expresses his theory in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), where "he who wanteth to kill

most thoroughly, *laugheth*" (387). In "Laughter" (1900), Bergson underscores that "an absence of feeling" accompanies drollery, since it "has no greater foe than emotion" (63).

Freud's theory of humour builds somewhat on most of the ideas (mentioned) above, but it is here particularly pertinent because Freud distinguishes between the comic and humour.¹ Freud describes humour as "a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; act[ing] as a substitute for the generation of these affects, put[ting] itself in their place" (228). According to Freud, the conditions for the appearance of humour are given in a situation where "we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect *in statu nascendi*" (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* 228). In the same 1905 *Jokes* book, Freud recognizes that the humorous moment contains the attempt to release, but not the release itself, of feeling (and thus also of desire). Freud would revise this conception in his 1927 paper in order to reflect his later topography of ego, super-ego and id. In the later work he concludes that humour is the contribution made to the comic by the inflated position of the super-ego, who reassuringly giggles at the ego. According to this conception, the humorous moment is defined by an internal split as a result of which one finds oneself ridiculous, and acknowledges this in a dignified amusing attitude ("Humour" 432).

Freud was not the first to have noticed the positive implication of the internal dichotomy within the individual during the humorous moment. Baudelaire had already alluded to the positive effect of this internal splitting when he comments, "the man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego" (154). This explains why, as Freud specifies, the humorous instant has "something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation" ("Humour" 428). Simon Critchley makes reference to Helmuth Plessner in order similarly to propose that humour is precisely the impossibility for the human being to be 'centric'

As Plessner puts it, laughter confirms the eccentric (*exzentrisch*) position of the human being in the world of nature. Plessner's thesis is that the life of animals is *zentrisch*, it is centred. This means that the animal simply

¹ Freud makes this distinction in his 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Luigi Pirandello will make a similar distinction between *comicità* and *umorismo* in his essay *L'Umore* (1908).

lives and experiences (*lebt und erlebt*). By contrast, the human being not only lives and experiences, he or she experiences those experiences (*erlebt sein Erleben*). That is, the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself. This is why humans are eccentric, because they live beyond the limits set for them by nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience. [...] The working out of the consequences of the eccentric position of the human is the main task of a philosophical anthropology, which is why laughter has such an absolutely central role in Plessner's work. (*On Humour* 28)

Human beings are eccentric animals defined by their continual failure to coincide with themselves and, particularly, with their bodies. Leopardi and Beckett's wicked snicker is directed at this same human inability to coincide with itself, exploring the internal split Baudelaire and Freud construe as characteristic of the humorous moment. Through this grin, everything physical and fallible can be acknowledged and treated with amusement.

In Freud's parlance, the humorous moment witnesses the triumph of narcissism ("Humour" 428), where the ego, through the help of the super-ego, refuses to be wiped out by the engulfing misery. While it conceals repressed desire, the humorous instant, which in Bergson's view, "does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human" (62), strives to allow that same characteristic of human fallibility – desire – to relieve the pressure weighing down on it. Freud's insistence that "humour is not resigned; it is rebellious" ("Humour" 429), acquires new meaning when perceived in this light. I read Leopardi and Beckett's resistance to the existential dead-end through a particular conception of humour—an exposition that comes closest to Freud's second revised version in his 1927 essay.

Leopardi refers to a kind of humour that could be perceived as simultaneously repressing and attempting to release desire. The Italian poet-philosopher is fully aware of the creative quality of dialectical oppositions and his poetics of *il vago* and *l'infinito* clearly has a dialectical basis. The poetic quality of all that is indefinite lies in its being the opposite of the limited reality that human beings face every day. Leopardi's poem "L'Infinito" represents the apex of this fusion of opposites.

The Italian poet-philosopher similarly construes laughter as both liberation of the senses and a light-heartedness that conceals an abyss. Perceived from this angle, Leopardi's is more of a Hobbesian strained and joyless grimace. The clear Hobbesian echoes in Leopardi have deep roots. In arguing how pleasure induces us to draw near to the thing that provoked the feeling, while pain induces one to "retire from the thing that displeaseth" (*Human Nature* 43), Hobbes outlined an early utilitarian, mate-

rialist psychology. Leopardi would later build his theory of pleasure on a similar materialist conception. According to this theory, pleasure and pain are produced from desire of *amor proprio*, a desire for pleasure that can never be completely satisfied. In *Zibaldone* Leopardi states, “conseguito un piacere, l’anima non cessa di desiderare il piacere, come non cessa mai di pensare, perché il pensiero e il desiderio del piacere sono due operazioni egualmente continue e inseparabili dalla sua esistenza” (2: 183).

Amor proprio is also at the heart of Leopardi’s longing to reach the ablation of desire. Apart from locking at its core the infinite human inclination towards pleasure, *amor proprio* motivates the human instinct of self-preservation, which is not in contradiction with desire as a quest for the Freudian death drive. Freud would expand a similar argument in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1924), where the said principle is in the midst of life-forces mainly expressed through desire. The pleasure principle, however, also “seems directly to sub-serve the death instincts” (167). The reactionary, regressive forces (and their compulsion to repeat) veil the ultimate attempt at self-preservation—the endeavour to dissolve everything to cosmic entropy. Antonio Prete reads the Leopardian desire as a return adumbrated in the Eros-Thanatos dilemma of the Freudian death drive (17).

Amor proprio, however, constitutes “*souffrance*”, which is the case with every living, striving organism. This is expressed in the famous terrifying inscription above Leopardi’s garden of unhappiness, which states, “entrate in un giardino di piante, d’erbe, di fiori. Sia pur quanto volete ridente. Sia nella più mite stagione dell’anno. Voi non potete volger lo sguardo in nessuna parte che voi non vi troviate del patimento. Tutta quella famiglia di vegetali è in stato di “*souffrance*”, qual individuo più, qual meno” (*Zibaldone* 2: 4175-78).

The complete removal of desire, proposed at a later stage, is explicitly announced in Leopardi’s poem “A Se Stesso” (quoted subsequently by Beckett), which knows its roots and motivations in this inscription. Only distraction through a multitude of chores can drive a wedge between the individual’s desire of *amor proprio* and the inevitable “*souffrance*” to which it leads. The attenuation of this pain is possible, I argue, through the guffaw that laughs insanely at earthly sorrow.

Leopardi defines humour as a means of success in the mundane, a way of asserting superiority: “Il ridere concilia stima e rispetto anche degli ignoti, tira a sé l’attenzione di tutti i circostanti e dà fra questi una sorte di superiorità” (*Pensieri* LXXVIII). This superiority masks weakness in that, as in Filippo Ottonieri’s desolate grin, there is nobody left to laugh at except for the self. In *Pensieri* (1827) Leopardi states, “le persone non sono ridicole se

non quando vogliono parere o essere ciò che non sono” (IC).² In the moral tale (*operetta morale*) “Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri,” the Italian poet-philosopher proposes to suspend desire and to do so specifically cutting through laughter, which conceals the malicious nature of the individual’s desires

Di infinite cose che nella vita comune, o negli uomini particolari, sono ridicole veramente, è rarissimo che si rida ... Anzi le più delle cose delle quali si ride ordinariamente, sono tutt’altro che ridicole in effetto; e di moltissime si ride per questa cagione stessa, che elle non sono degne di riso o in parte alcuna o tanto che basti. (322)

The humour-smokescreen in Leopardi is doubly oxymoronic. Desire is directly linked to *amor proprio* and the impossible search for happiness. To cut through humour and reveal the consuming effect of desire, the individual needs to be distanced from the indefatigable search for happiness. This task, as Farfarello tells Malambruno in the moral tale “Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello,” is impossible.

FARFARELLO: Dunque, amandoti necessariamente del maggiore amore che tu sei capace, necessariamente desideri il più che puoi la felicità propria; e non potendo mai di gran lunga essere soddisfatto di questo tuo desiderio, che è sommo, resta che tu non possi fuggire per nessun verso di non essere infelice. (100- 01)

The drive to pleasure and pain revolves around material desire. Nonetheless, pleasure and pain can be subsumed in memory, from which imagination finally springs. In Leopardi, the world is ultimately a fable that nourishes illusions, which on the 17th of December 1823 are still crucial: “Tutto è follia in questo mondo fuorché il folleggiare. Tutto è degno di riso fuorché il ridersi di tutto. Tutto è vanità fuorché le belle illusioni e le dilettevoli frivolezze” (*Zibaldone* 6: 3990,2). In his theory of pleasure, Leopardi emphasizes the importance given to the deluding power of imagination. In the moral tale “Storia Del Genero Umano,” he speaks about the preponderance of dreams and illusions (28-29).

The Leopardian humour, mentioned in Luigi Pirandello’s 1908 essay *L’Umorismo* (42), comes to life in this paradoxical, but highly creative zone, where the body laughs at the engulfing grief and displaces wretchedness to

² For passages dealing with the same argument see *Zibaldone* 1774 (September 23, 1821); *Zibaldone* 3000 (July 11, 1823); *Pensieri* CVI.

the drive exerted by imagination.³

Through this light-hearted approach, the pessimistic notion regarding humanity's doom is fought. Indeed for Leopardi, humour acts like a double-edged sword, offering strong resistance to the ubiquitous earthly delusions while simultaneously acting as a buffer between the individual and his or her passions. Moreover, it is also the only conceivable way to respond to the trials and tribulations of life, paradoxically allowing expression to the desiring self through imagination. As Freud would claim almost a hundred years later, using his ego, superego and id topography, "in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion" ("Humour" 432). Leopardi's humour works through a tongue-in-cheek kind of writing whereby the irony of his so-called cosmi-comic prose faces the stark confrontation between a distinctive fable-like quality and the finitude of *physis*.

Counterpoising the superiority theory of Hobbesian echoes, in May 1825 Leopardi writes, "quanto più l'uomo cresce ... e crescendo si fa più incapace di felicità, tanto egli si fa proclive e domestico al riso, e più straniero al pianto" (*Zibaldone* 6: 4138,2). In the moral tale "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro," Eleandro's courageous smile testifies to the Leopardian resistance to human dolor: "la disperazione [che] ha sempre nella bocca un sorriso" (404-06). Eleandro's smile acknowledges and bravely takes stock of human desolation and weakness, desire included.

In Freud's 1927 essay, the dignified smile conveys "humour ... [as] the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego" (432). This decorous beam greatly exceeds in merit the laughter of superiority, which simply expresses repressed desire and unconscious aggression ("Humour" 429). Indeed the Leopardian ageing laugh is imbued with dignity and value in the way the howling which asserts superiority is not. In the classical *quaestio*—whether it would be better to laugh or cry when confronted with the misfortunes of the world—for the protagonist of "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" the obvious choice is Democritian laughter, a grin that defies the ills of the world

Ridendo dei nostri mali, trovo qualche conforto; e procuro di recarne altrui nello stesso modo. Se questo non mi vien fatto, tengo pure per fermo che il ridere dei nostri mali sia l'unico profitto che se ne possa

³ In *L'Umorismo*, Pirandello specifically cites Leopardi as a good example of *umorismo* as opposed to *comicità*. On listing Italian *litterati* who are truly capable of *umorismo*, Pirandello states, "penso a quei certi dialoghi e a quelle certe prosette del Leopardi" (127).

cavare, e l'unico rimedio che vi si trovi. Dicono i poeti che la disperazione ha sempre nella bocca un sorriso. Non dovete pensare che io non compatisca all'infelicità umana. Ma non potendovisi riparare con nessuna forza, nessuna arte, nessuna industria, nessun patto; stimo assai più degno dell'uomo, e di una disperazione magnanima, il ridere dei mali comuni; che il mettermene a sospirare, lagrimare e stridere insieme cogli altri, o incitandoli a fare altrettanto. (*Operette Morali* 406)

Samuel Beckett voices a similar sentiment in his play *Happy Days* (1968) where, as protagonist Winnie concedes, the human being can only find consolation by "laughing wild amid severest woe" (*Collected Dramatic Works* 150).

The *forte* of this resistance lies in the *dianoia* manifested in the determination of many of Beckett's characters to know the real condition of the individual. Beckett's *dianoia*, however, is nowhere stronger than in the dia-noetic laugh, the *risus purus* as described by Arsene in *Watt* (1953), which offers strong resistance to an existential situation.

Simon Critchley and Alain Badiou both argue that Beckett's guffaw celebrates an obstinate opposition to the "suffering of being." According to Badiou, the human and humane comedy of Beckett's works underscores a refusal to submit to the temptation of nihilism (39). Critchley argues, "[Beckett's] humour ... resists direct translation and can only be thematized humourlessly" (*Very Little... Almost Nothing* 157). Beckett's "mirthless laugh ... opens us up and causes our defences to drop momentarily; but it is precisely at that moment of weakness that Beckett's humour rebounds upon the subject" (*On Humour* 49). Critchley speaks of the Irish writer's laughter as "the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic" (*Very Little... Almost Nothing* 157). The Beckettian defiant amusement indeed constitutes his greatest resource in the struggle against nihilism.

But what does Beckett's work itself say about the subject? In *Molloy* (1951), Moran debates the point with Father Ambrose

Like Job haha, he said. I too said haha. What a joy it is to laugh, from time to time, he said. Is it not? I said. It is peculiar to man, he said. So I have noticed, I said. A brief silence ensued ... Animals never laugh, he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said. What? He said. It takes us to find that funny, I said loudly. He mused. Christ never laughed either, he said, so far as we know. He looked at me. Can you wonder? I said. (93)

Beckett specifies that humour is characteristic of human beings. As he shows through his work, however, amusement is achieved by exploiting the individual's ability to reflect on Plessner's aspired-to animal-like 'centricity'. As

Critchley states, “humour takes place in the gap between being a body and having a body” (*On Humour* 44). The body’s desire is what struggles to surface, a tension that is palpably felt in the hilarious scene from Beckett’s *Molloy* where the protagonist concocts a mathematical analysis of his farting (30).⁴

The body, nonetheless, is not being idealized, an accusation Critchley, with some justification, levels against Mikhail Bakhtin (*On Humour* 51). The body as object and subject of comedy is disoriented, estranged, and failing. The same wedge driven between *amor proprio* and unhappiness in Leopardi is filled specifically with this laughter, a relic of the radical ex-centricity of the human being. Through the ageing grin and the mirthless guffaw, Leopardi and Beckett attempt to resist adversity. In both cases, however, the Freudian humour that accompanies dark laughter is crucial.

In his 1927 essay, Freud claims that humour is one of the great series of methods that the human mind has constructed in order to express repressed feelings and evade the compulsion to suffer: “a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in madness” (429). Similarly, the Leopardian and Beckettian humorous moment represses, albeit it also liberates, desire. The two writers’ humour achieves more than comic relief because, as comedian-protagonist Eddie Waters, in Trevor Griffiths’ *Comedians*, states:

A real comedian—that’s a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about

⁴ The tension that holds this humour together is rife because of the incongruity between, on the one hand, the attempt to repress and close off the body, and, on the other, the explosive nature of its sheer materiality. A similar argument, albeit with emphasis on the theory of the grotesque (and thus not directly relevant to this argument), is made by Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin underscores the profound ambivalence that characterizes the aspect of negation within humour. In his notion of the “carnavalesque,” what is uncrowned, through the logic of things turned topsy-turvy, is renewed (*Rabelais and his World* 322). Bakhtin underlines that all aspects of the comic turn the essential topographical element of the bodily hierarchy upside down, where the lower stratum replaces the upper stratum. In Bakhtin’s *Rabelais* the material bodily element uncrowns and renews the entire world of medieval ideology. This is, paradoxically, the same humour of the performers of the marketplace from whom the *lazzi* of the *commedia dell’arte* would spring. Not surprisingly, Jacques Callot (1592-1635), whose art is seen to have an affinity with the dark satire of Francisco Goya’s, is portrayed by Denis Diderot as the principle illustrator of the *commedia dell’arte* (*Rabelais and His World*, 353-54).

what's hard, above all, about what they want. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke ... has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate the will and the desire*, it has to *change the situation*. (*Comedians* 20, emphasis added)

Humour is then, in Critchley's words, "[a] symptom ... of societal repression ... a return of the repressed" (*On Humour* 12). The liberating, creative aspect, however, cannot be overlooked because it brings about a change of situation where the real is 'surrealized.'⁵

The dignified smile in Leopardi and the joyless guffaw in Beckett are creative. They affirm the importance of humorously acknowledging the human being's infinitesimal insignificance. The two writers belong to the same tradition that privileges art as a form of resistance to nihilism and for which art, in its autonomy, remains an attestation, not in spite of but thanks to its very negativity – a shadowy art that perennially asserts a residue of human desire. Leopardi and Beckett are indeed poets of emptiness and of darkness, but the tenor is not hopelessness, nihilism, or utter nothingness. Leopardi and Beckett are both virtuosi of a black humour, conceived, nonetheless, in all its possible shades of grey.

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⁵ This starts to explain why André Breton was so interested in *l'humour noir*.

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