Ludic Limbos

*Beckett's Belacqua and Intertextual Subversion in Molloy*

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Abstract

The minor character of Belacqua from Dante's *Purgatorio* recurs often in Beckett's early work. This article emphasizes the comic in its critical reading of *Molloy*, by studying how Beckett both adapted and parodied the language of the *Commedia*. Such an approach reveals the complex tension created by Beckett's simultaneously parodic yet reverential appropriation of Dante's language. This rhetorical strategy also points to a larger theme in the novel: subversive laughter aimed at theological, philosophical and literary authority.

Résumé

Un personnage d'importance mineure dans le *Purgatoire* de Dante, Belacqua, se retrouve souvent dans les premières œuvres de Beckett. Cet article met l’accent sur le comique dans *Molloy*: une telle approche révèle la tension complexe créée par l’appropriation à la fois parodique et révérentielle de la rhétorique de Dante. Cette stratégie rhétorique pointe aussi vers un thème plus vaste dans le roman, celui des rires subversifs, visant l’autorité théologique, philosophique et littéraire.

Keywords

Belacqua – Dante – intertextuality – humor – parody
Might not the beatific vision become a source of boredom, in the long run?

BECKETT, Molloy

Dante the pilgrim's encounter with the minor character of the lute maker Belacqua in *Purgatorio* is one of only two episodes in the entire *Commedia* that moves the pilgrim to smile: “Li atti suoi pigri e le corte parole/mosser le labbra mie un poco a riso” (“His lazy movements and curt speech/slowly shaped my lips into a smile”; Dante, 4.121–122; Hollander, 2003, 85). Belacqua’s earthly postponement of his penance has earned him a corresponding wait outside the gates of Mount Purgatory and seeing his old friend as lazy here as he was back in Florence, the pilgrim cannot help but grin. In his work, Samuel Beckett returns repeatedly to this “figure of *pigrizia*” (Chesney, 32). Belacqua appears nine times in Beckett’s 1934 short-story collection *More Pricks Than Kicks* as well as throughout the trilogy of French novels. Instead of reading this marginal Dantean figure as a symbol of modernity’s post-religious predicament, this article emphasizes the comic in its critical interpretation of *Molloy*’s rhetoric and examines the complex tension created by Beckett’s simultaneously parodic and reverential appropriation of the language of the *Commedia*. A careful reading of this intertext—along with other previously missed Dantean allusions in *Molloy*—reveals how Beckett used Dantean humor to construct his own representations of the marginal man. The intertextual connection between Belacqua and Molloy also points to a larger theme in the novel, that of subversive laughter aimed at theological, philosophical and literary authority. My approach to *Molloy* builds on a long tradition of criticism focused on humor in Beckett, from Ruby Cohn’s early work in this area to more recent interventions by Laura Salisbury and Manfred Pfister.

What about Belacqua’s original act in *Purgatorio* drew Beckett in? Some critics have read *Molloy*’s references to Belacqua as an existential parable. Four years after Beckett worked with Patrick Bowles to translate *Molloy* into English, Walter Strauss published his perceptive study “Dante’s Belacqua and Beckett’s Tramps.” Strauss, while conceding that Belacqua was a comic character in Dante’s work, nevertheless insists on a more philosophical reading as applied to *Molloy*. “Beckett’s fascination—even obsession—with Belacqua points up the
relevance of the theme of expectancy to the modern spiritual dilemma and at the same time underscores the despair of the modern sensibility in the fact of it” (251). Strauss goes on to read Beckett's many references to Belacqua in his early writings as a prelude to the aesthetics of spiritual delay present in other works, such as Waiting for Godot: “The waifs in Beckett no longer have a God to seek, not even to wait for; they simply wait for something, because waiting is the only mode of existence possible to them. It is in precisely this resignation to eternal waiting that Beckett’s derelicts resemble Dante’s Belacqua (who waits in eternity, but not eternally)” (252). Eugene Webb gives a similarly negative reading, arguing that Beckett’s novels absorb the Commedia only to reject the orderly Thomistic universe on which it is based: “To a large extent Beckett’s novels make up an extended commentary both on the untruth of Dante’s religious and metaphysical system and on the inability of twentieth century man to completely free himself of a tendency to want to see in the universe some of the order that Dante’s beliefs seemed to give it” (23). More recently, Ferrini has traced “le sens de l’attente” in Beckett’s dramatic works directly to Belacqua’s “posture uterine” and reads Molloy’s finding of himself in his mother’s house as a symbolic externalization of Belacqua’s embryonal pose (2003b, 201). These readings of Molloy emphasize Beckett’s philosophical use of Belacqua, as a symbol of our stranded position in a post-theological world.

By contrast, Daniela Caselli argues that Beckett’s uses of Dante are more diverse—sometimes humorous, sometimes authoritative, sometimes random, and often implicitly criticizing the very idea of textual authority. She notes, for instance, how Beckett’s first novel, Dream of Fair to Middling Women, “constructs Belacqua as the critical, humorous and anti-heroic voice which challenges the inherent teleological structure of narration” (47) while the Belacqua of More Pricks Than Kicks is more explicitly intratextual, “inheriting many of the features of the Dream Belacqua” (59). Especially in “Dante and the Lobster,” the focus shifts to the “instability of the notion of Belacqua’s identity” (59). Caselli goes on to emphasize that the Dantean allusions in the novels establish the Commedia “as a flickering, non-coinciding, intratextual memory which underlines the secondariness of language” (137). Beckett’s near constant citation of Dante not only self-consciously calls attention to the borrowed quality of language, but also recreates Dante’s characters both within and across Beckett’s own work; intra-textual references subtly replace the “fading memory” of the inter-textual source material like a kind of palimpsest (135). Belacqua for Caselli thus functions partly as a device to confront the reader with the unstable status of the novel as a fictional text. In a similar vein, Jeanne-Sarah de Larquier argues that “Molloy can be interpreted as a metalanguage story, that is, a story about
language, and more specifically, about the narrator’s struggle with its arbitrariness insofar as it is indifferent to his needs” (43).

Though useful in their own right, the above-mentioned studies do not fully capture the humor at play in both the original source material or in Beckett’s deployment of it in the figure of his anti-heroic madman, Molloy. Jacqueline Risset comes closer to the mark when she writes that “Beckett was perhaps the only of the Dante scholars [...] to grasp the complexity of the attitude of Belacqua, ironic of course, and comic, in his obstinance, but also melancholic, and sadly tragic” (Ferrini, 2003a, xvii; my translation). Michael Robinson suggests that it was the “surly humor” and “persistent sloth” of Dante’s original that likely attracted Beckett’s attention: “Dante’s portrait, which humorously reveals how little this punishment disturbs Belacqua, contains much that Beckett was to use in his later work” (79). Belacqua’s exasperated sigh, “O frate, andar in sù che porta?” (“Brother, what’s the good of going up?”; Dante, 4.127; Hollander, 2003, 85), is dialogue Beckett himself could have written. If, as Beckett once glibly noted to an interviewer, Dante was a Joycean writer, then perhaps we may be forgiven for saying that Dante also had a Beckettian streak.

Paying more attention to Belacqua’s comedic chops dovetails with the long critical tradition that foregrounds humor and parody in Beckett’s oeuvre. Critics from Laura Salisbury to Ruby Cohn and Manfred Pfister have discovered in Beckett a voice aimed not just at producing philosophical discomfort but also at eliciting laughter. Salisbury, for instance, has argued that the anal and excremental humor in the Trilogy functions as a “parody of a perfectly ordered petit-bourgeois social world and a smoothly functioning capitalist economy based on the uninterrupted passage of consumption and excretion” (99). Cohn has drawn attention to Beckett’s use of parody, particularly in dialogues, where “sentence and paragraph accumulate, [and] in which the tone is sometimes riotously, sometimes grotesquely out of key with its subject” (11). More recently, Pfister has examined Beckett’s painstakingly “detailed notations” on varieties of laughter that appear in his dramatic scripts, ranging from “stifles” to “hearty laugh” to “high forced laugh” (178). My reading of Molloy aligns more closely with this critical tradition, but attempts to add to the conversation by focusing more narrowly on the interrelationship of Beckettian and Dantean humor.

One final observation on Belacqua is in order. Beckett’s use of allusions was obsessively detailed. He carefully copied sentences from books he was studying into his own notebooks. Knowlson has memorably called this approach to intertextuality a “grafting technique,” adding that Beckett “even checked off the quotations in his private notebooks once they had been incorporated into his own work” (109). It would be odd if Beckett had overlooked the ludic and joking atmosphere that pervades Purgatorio IV in adapting it to his own work. Mol-
lof does not merely borrow an obscure allusion from Dante’s epic, but enacts Belacqua’s own laughter-inducing subversiveness, his mocking of the arbitrary rules that leave him waiting just outside the gate.

1 The ’Belacqua Fantasy’: Beckett and Dantean Humor

The most conspicuous intertextual reference to Dante appears very early on in Molloy. Attempting to watch a man at some distance, Molloy stations himself behind a boulder: “[C] gazed around as if to engrave the landmarks on his memory and must have seen the rock in the shadow of which I crouched like Belacqua, or Sordello, I forget” (12). The crippled, mentally degraded Molloy, incapable of remembering his own name, is somehow able to place two obscure references to the early canti of Purgatorio. At the same time, Molloy’s unstable mind revises its own allusion, unsure whether Belacqua or Sordello better fits his physical position.1 The confusion on Molloy’s part could be Beckett playing—as he does elsewhere with Belacqua Shuah in More Pricks Than Kicks—with the reversal of his own initials. In fairness to Molloy, Dante the pilgrim also encounters Sordello, a troubadour from Mantua, just outside of Purgatory.

While Molloy may be confused about which of these two Dantian figures he most resembles, Beckett was not. In other texts, Beckett returns again and again to the figure of Belacqua resting under a rock. Murphy, written before Molloy, has an extended meditation, a “Belacqua fantasy” as the text calls it, in which Murphy dreams of living longer so that he can spend more time waiting in Ante-Purgatory. The reverie specifically dwells on the “embryonal repose” of Belacqua, of his grasping his knees with his hands as in Dante’s original: “E un di lor, che mi sembiava lasso,/sedeva e abbracciava le ginocchia,/tenendo ’l viso giù tra esse basso” (“and one of them, who seemed so very weary,/was sitting with his arms around his knees,/his face pressed down between them”; 4.106–108; Hollander, 2003, 83). Murphy builds out this initial citation of Belacqua into a fully formed vignette, one that captures not simply Belacqua’s physical posture, but also his unique spiritual predicament as a soul who—preconditioned by his earthly indolence—is in no rush to climb the mountain:

1 This revisionary quality of Molloy’s language manifests itself consistently throughout the novel. Take, for example, the following passages: “Elliptically speaking, for it was only later, by way of induction, or deduction, I forget which” (25) or “The dog was uniformly yellow, a mongrel I suppose, or a pedigree, I can never tell the difference” (46) or “Or perhaps I was mistaken and she was really crying, with the noise of laughter. Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me” (48–49).
At this moment Murphy would willingly have waived his expectation of Antepurgatory for five minutes in his chair, renounced the lee of Belacqua’s rock and his embryonal repose, looking down at dawn across the reeds to the trembling of the austral sea and the sun obliquing to the north as it rose, immune from expiation until he should have dreamed it all through again, with the downright dreaming of an infant, from the spermarium to the crematorium. He thought so highly of this postmortem situation, its advantages were present in such detail to his mind, that he actually hoped he might live to be old. Then he would have a long time lying there dreaming, watching the dayspring run through its zodiac, before the toil up hill to Paradise. The gradient was outrageous, one in less than one. God grant no godly chandler would shorten his time with a good prayer.

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This passage is practically a translation of Purgatorio 4, from the details about Belacqua’s posture to the Dantesque astrological observations and the features of the purgatorial landscape. The reference to shortening Murphy’s time with a prayer is a direct reference to Belacqua’s own complaint that if others prayed for him, he could perhaps shorten his sentence but that no one will do so, a fact he uses to justify his loafing at the foot of the mountain. Murphy further amplifies the comic aspect of the scene. “The gradient was outrageous,” he jokingly complains about the slope of the mountain (itself an echo of Dante’s complaint to Virgil on the same topic). In an inventive twist, Murphy plans to extend his future time in Ante-Purgatory by living to old age without repenting. Murphy thus anticipates the rule that Belacqua only learns of after his death and attempts to optimize its effect so that he can dally even longer than he might otherwise have done. Beckett’s engagement with Belacqua’s comedy here is obsessively granular, a set of precise textual coordinates laid down inside his own text. At the same time, the marginal Belacqua, who takes up a merely twenty lines in the Commedia, in Beckett becomes a universe unto himself, almost as if Beckett were filling out the narrative that Dante omits as the pilgrim leaves Belacqua behind.

While the allusion to Belacqua in Molloy is more abbreviated than the section in Murphy, it is clear that the full context of that episode was never far from Beckett’s mind. Like Belacqua, Molloy is caught in a loop that he cannot escape. When Strauss speaks of the “expectancy” of our modern spiritual condition, he is honing in on this aspect of Molloy’s appropriation of Belacqua. In a post-theological world in which the promise of eventually ascending the mountain has disappeared, the modern Belacqua waits for a divine dispensa-
tion that never arrives. Still, reading Molloy’s Belacqua narrowly as an emblem of philosophical *Sturm und Drang* overlooks the comedy of the medieval original and of *Molloy*’s adaptation. Twice in *Purgatorio* 4, Belacqua talks back to his interlocutor, astonishing and amusing the pilgrim. After the pilgrim chides the laziness of the unknown soul he sees curled up in a fetal position, Belacqua quips: “Or va tu sù, che se’ valente!” (“Go on up then, you who are so spry”; Dante, 4.114; Hollander, 2003, 83). And when the pilgrim once again reproves his old friend for not attempting to scale the mountain, Belacqua dryly remarks, “O frate, andar in sù che porta?/ché non mi lascerebbe ire a’ martiri/l’angel di Dio che siede in su la porta” (“Brother, what’s the good of going up?/The angel of God who sits in the gateway/would not let me pass into the torments”; Dante 4.127–129; Hollander, 2003, 85). The mock wistful tone of this slothful speaker is what causes the pilgrim to crack a smile. Here is a soul who seems to question the divine path that those around him tirelessly seek: the promise of heaven. Dante has inserted into his own relentlessly over-determined text a brief moment of comedic delay. Belacqua, true to his earthly self, is still putting off God, even when his existence can no longer be doubted. He thus comically resists the path he knows he must follow. So, too, Molloy/Moran’s quest, such as it is, is constantly derailed by humorous interludes: the counting of his farts, the collection of sucking stones, the mock scholastic theological inquiries. In this respect, Beckett borrows the subversive quality of Dante’s original. Neither Belacqua nor Molloy laugh themselves; instead, each evokes readerly laughter, puncturing the seriousness with which critics would treat them.

2 Comical *Commedia*: Dante as Bathos in *Molloy*

*Molloy* contains several other examples of Dantine appropriation, almost always appearing in a parodic context. Critics have missed some of these echoes and reverberations. These borrowings, mostly riffs on the grandness of Dantine rhetoric from episodes in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, strengthen the argument that one of Dante’s greatest contributions to Beckett’s literary project was the possibility of rhetorical humor. As Adorno notes in “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” Beckett is frequently drawn to a kind of parodic impulse: “parody of the philosophy spit out by his dialogues as well as parody of forms. Existentialism itself is parodied” (121). That humor was sometimes directly present in Dante’s original text, as with Belacqua; in other cases, Beckett borrowed the epic tone of the *Commedia* for mock serious declarations that are played for laughter. For example, when Molloy announces to the reader, “But before I leave
this earthly paradise, suspended between the mountains and the sea, sheltered from certain winds and exposed to all that Auster vents ... it would ill become me not to mention the awful cries of the corncrakes” (20), his initial soaring rhetoric evokes Dante the pilgrim’s own lofty speeches, but is just as quickly deflated by Molloy’s colloquial description of cacophonous bird noises. The landscape described here resembles not the bleak, vaguely Irish landscape of the rest of Molloy, but rather Mount Purgatory, surrounded by the sea and buffered by the southern wind (the Auster) that gives Australia its name (the rough location of Dante’s mountain). Molloy appears to be hallucinating his own kind of Belacqua fantasy, the one that Murphy could only dream about. Rubin Rabinovitz, who has written perceptively about Beckett and Dantean allegory, has noted the bathetic quality of Dante’s influence in Molloy: “Sometimes Beckett abandons an analogy because he is parodying an epic theme ... Dante leaves the forest when his journey begins; Molloy emerges from the forest at the end of his journey. This is the humor of reversals and unfulfilled expectations, a way of mocking the inflated claims epic authors sometimes make for their heroes. Beckett’s irony transforms his own heroes into more human creatures of ordinary proportions lest they be overwhelmed by an aura of epic hyperbole” (41).

A few sentences later, Molloy again invokes the textual flavor of the Commedia with an astrological periphrasis: “when over what is called our hemisphere the sun is at its pitilessmost and the arctic radiance comes pissing on our midnights” (21). Beckett here parodies the frequent sequences of time-telling that pervade the Commedia. To name just a handful of those: “It was the hour of morning, when the sun mounts with those stars/that shone with it when God’s own love/first set in motion those fair things” (Hollander, 2002, 5) or “Now night was gazing on the stars that light/the other pole, the stars of our own so low/they did not rise above the ocean floor” (Hollander, 2002, 485) or “Already the sun’s last rays before the night/were slanting up so high above us/that stars were showing here and there” (Hollander, 2003, 373). By echoing these Dantean turns of phrase, Beckett puts Molloy strangely into the shoes of the pilgrim. The marginal Belacqua becomes the center of the narrative, the pilgrim’s linear path to the stars replaced by the erratic journey of Molloy/Moran. As Sheehan has noted, Beckett consistently played on the generic conventions of travel narratives in Molloy, converting the tropes of the detective novel and the picaresque into Molloy’s (and Moran’s) manic movement (26). Added here could be the ‘quest’ narrative of the Commedia itself, with its over-determined teleological goal and precise geographical and temporal signposting along the way. Molloy’s duality, as both a Belacqua and an inverted version of Dante the pilgrim, highlights the contradictory tension between rest and movement.
that recurs throughout *Molloy.* This uneasy aesthetic marriage—of Belacqua’s stasis and the pilgrim’s forward momentum—contributes to the temporal confusion of Molloy. On the one hand, *Molloy* mimics the precision of Dantinean time-telling. One the other hand, that hyper-accurate calculation of time based on the sun’s position is undercut by Molloy/Moran’s uncertainty about longer periods. Moran declares that “It was in August, in September at the latest, that I was ordered home. It was Spring when I got there, I will not be more precise. I had therefore been all winter on the way” (227). While time’s passage is alluded to, the reader is never told how much time has actually elapsed.

Another Dantinean intertext overlooked by critics comes in the sequence in which Molloy discusses using his rectum as a barometer of his health:

For as long as I had remained at the seaside my weak points, while admittedly increasing in weakness, as was only to be expected, only increased imperceptibly, in weakness I mean. So that I would have hesitated to exclaim, with my finger up my arse-hole for example, Jesus-Christ, it’s much worse than yesterday, I can hardly believe it is the same hole. I apologize for having to revert to this lewd orifice, ‘tis my muse will have it so. Perhaps it is less to be thought of as the eyesore here called by its name than as the symbol of *those passed over in silence,* a distinction due perhaps to its centrality and its air of being a link between me and the other excrement. We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arse-hole and affect to despise it.

Although Salisbury has written on *Molloy*’s scatological comedy (2015, 86–88), she does not mention how the excremental context in this episode fits well with the infernal humor of Malacoda and his troop of devils in *Inferno* 21. Famously, as the demon Malacoda leaves the pilgrim at the end of that canto, he rallies his platoon with a dramatic fart: “elli avea del cul fatto trombetta” (“he had made a trumpet of his asshole”; Dante, 21.139; Hollander, 2002, 392). The cryp-

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2 Sheehan’s recent essay on the link in *Molloy* between genre and the idea of the “nomad” explores this dynamic in further detail (24–38).

3 Beckett was not afraid to mix and match characters from the Dantinean universe. In “Draff,” one of the short stories in *More Pricks Than Kicks,* the corpse of Belacqua is handled by an undertaker named Malacoda (178). This playful intermingling of minor characters from distinct canticles of the *Commedia* (and who otherwise would never have encountered each other according to the ‘rules’ of Dante’s literary universe) is consistent with the claim that Beckett’s allusions subtly destabilize (and reinvent) the idea of Dantinean authority (Caselli, 135).

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tic reference to “those passed over in silence” may also suggest a more direct allusion, that is, to the souls of the undecided in *Inferno* 3, who are locked out of the gates of hell because of their moral indifference. Molloy’s mysterious reference will be repeated in precisely the same words in the Moran section, again in a Dantesque atmosphere: “And I shall pass over in silence the fiends in human shape and the phantoms of the dead that tried to prevent me from getting home, in obedience to Youdi’s command” (228). In Dante’s version, Virgil, after describing the souls of the indifferent, warns Dante not to speak of them any further, but to look and pass them in silence: “Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;/misericordia e giustizia li sdegna;/non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa” (“The world does not permit report of them./Mercy and justice hold them in contempt./Let us not speak of them—look and pass by”; Dante, 3.49–51; Hollander, 2002, 49). Dante’s textual erasure of the apathetic becomes a kind of punishment for their moral cowardice. Molloy grotesquely compares his own body part to these souls, who are rejected from both heaven and hell. The metaphorical link is not very clear; is it the invisibility and hiddenness of the orifice that resembles the souls of the indifferent, whose identities remain unknown? Nevertheless, Molloy’s crude allusion clearly makes light of the high theological drama of Dante.

That anti-theological strain in *Molloy* culminates in the mock scholastic questions compiled by Moran toward the end of the novel. The two lists of metaphysical inquiries recall in a general way the philosophical language of scholastic medieval texts, such as the *Summa Theologica* as well as the questioning Dante must undergo from Saint Peter, Saint James and Saint John in *Paradiso* 24–26. The questions posed in those canti are academic: “Di, buon Cristiano, fatti manifesto: fede che è?” (“Speak up, good Christian, and make your declaration./What is faith?”; Dante 24.52–53; Hollander, 2002, 637) and Dante’s syllogistic responses, intended to demonstrate his intellectual readiness to progress higher in Paradise, are earnest recitations of theological authority. While Moran utilizes a seemingly logical numbering system to raise “certain questions of a theological nature” (228), neither is he being interrogated by authoritative religious figures, nor is his discourse of a serious nature. The flippant tone and sacrilegious content of his questions quickly betray their own ridiculousness: “4. How much longer are we to hang about waiting for the antichrist? […] 14. Might not the beatific vision become a source of boredom, in the long run?” (229). His description of these questions as part of a “charming and frivolous world” that he sometimes escapes to (230) and of the language of the Pater Noster as “pretty” (239) make explicit Beckett’s impulse for parody and the Belacquan resistance to authority. These passages are designed to poke fun at the substance and form of authoritative discourse. Moran here is essen-
tially posing the same questions Dante the pilgrim puts forth throughout the Commedia; yet, while Dante the pilgrim is ultimately sincere in his theological convictions, Moran’s questions do not elicit the truth but a laugh. Subversiveness, this passage suggests, is inversely related to a protagonist’s sincerity.

Ultimately, that destabilizing attitude threatens to engulf the text of Molloy itself. Moran’s final report, we learn, is an intentional lie: “[The voice] told me to write the report ... Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (241). The falsity of Moran’s report is revealed through a comparison of what he actually experiences (“It was not midnight”) and what he writes (“It is midnight”), raising questions about Beckett’s ‘report’ to us as readers. It is as if the natural outcome of Beckett’s hyper-parodic narrative is the unraveling of the text itself. Moran’s highlighting of the fictionality of his own text bears parallels to the way Beckett uses and abuses the flavor of Dantean rhetoric, which itself often toyed with its status as representative truth.4

The subversiveness of Dantian episodes in Molloy arises not just from Beckett’s repurposing of a minor comic character from the Commedia but also from how he co-opts the very language of the epic. Like light emerging through perforations in a sheet, Dantian intertexts erupt through and are altered by their translation in Molloy. Those sites of intertextuality (and, per Caselli, intratextuality) are marked by their humorous qualities, by the ways in which Beckett both unearthed and refashioned Dante’s funny bone. Those moments of irreverence also highlight a deeper continuity in Beckett’s work, that of the foregrounding of subversive laughter. In so doing, Beckett elevates the marginal, the figure who stands at the gates and does not yet know how (or wish) to enter. Belacqua’s insistence that there is not any use to going up the mountain (the gradient, remember, is too outrageous) is a moment of resistance against the divine powers that be, a partial renunciation of the teleological pull toward which his Christian soul ought to be inclined.

4 For instance, Dante completed Inferno after his expulsion from Florence, but in the poem, which is set in 1300 and well before his exile, Farinata ‘predicts’ the poet’s being forced to leave. By embedding this prophecy inside the text, Dante attempts to hide the fictionality of his discourse from the naive reader. Teodolinda Barolini has noted how Virgil insists on showing the pilgrim only the souls of those that are famous and yet many of Dante’s souls are only famous because of Dante’s text (18). Finally, one is reminded of Boccaccio’s claim that several ladies of Verona were awed to see Dante returned from hell, his soot-covered face proof that he had visited Inferno as he said he had.
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