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Weakness and Pietas in Gianni Vattimo's Weak Thought and Samuel Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster"

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Abstract

The following article offers an analysis of Samuel Beckett's short story "Dante and the Lobster" through the lens of Gianni Vattimo's weak thought. It claims that Beckett's short story provides a more practical perspective on Vattimo's notion of weakness and on his call for an ethics based on *pietas*. As it focuses on the specific vulnerability of individual entities—specifically a lobster about to be boiled alive—"Dante and the Lobster" highlights the importance of considering weakness not merely as an abstract notion but as an actual condition of beings.

Résumé

L'article qui suit présente une analyse de « Dante and the Lobster » de Samuel Beckett, à travers le prisme de la 'pensée faible' selon Gianni Vattimo. Il postule que cette nouvelle de Beckett offre une perspective sur la notion de faiblesse chez Vattimo et sur son appel à une éthique fondée sur la *pietas*. En se focalisant sur la vulnérabilité spécifique des entités individuelles—en particulier un homard sur le point d'être ébouillanté vivant—« Dante and the Lobster » souligne l'importance de considérer la faiblesse non pas seulement comme une notion abstraite mais comme la condition réelle des êtres.

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Mots-clés

Pensée Faible – Gianni Vattimo – Samuel Beckett – dommage – vulnérabilité – "Dante et le Homard"

"Dante and the Lobster", the opening story of Samuel Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), is a deceptively straightforward short story. The seeming simplicity of the narrative, following its main character Belacqua through three phases of his day—"one, lunch; two, the lobster; three, the Italian lesson" (Beckett 2010, 4)—is permeated by a dense web of references to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and by a gripping reflection on pity. The following article will analyze "Dante and the Lobster" alongside Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought' and suggest that Beckett's short story might be helpful in reconsidering some of the tenets of Vattimo's theory. With its focus on the everyday, its approach to pity, and attention to a non-human animal, Beckett's short story highlights the importance of considering specific entities when theorizing weakness. As it presents human, non-human animals, and inanimate objects in vulnerable and fragile states, the story moves from a metaphorical to a literal conception of weakness which redefines the role of pity and underlines the potential difficulty of turning an abstract theory into practice.

1 Gianni Vattimo's Weak Thought

Influenced by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo develops the notion of 'weak thought' in the 1980s, delineating its distinctive features in the opening essay of a collection titled *Il Pensiero Debole* and published in 1983. Embracing postmodern complaints about ultimate truths, solid structures, and linear historicism, Vattimo's weak thinking attempts to weaken "the strong frameworks of metaphysics—*archai, Gründe*, primary evidences and ultimate destinies" (1984, 155) without replacing them with other grounding and absolute notions. Rather than overcoming metaphysics altogether, Vattimo opts for a twisting of its constitutive elements and key notions through

Heidegger's process of *Verwindung*.[1] Playing on the different lexical meanings of the German word—indicating both a recovery from an illness and a distortion—Vattimo conceives of *Verwindung* as a "recovery-acceptance-distortion" (1988, 407) which does not fully dismiss absolute metaphysical values but weakens their violent hold on rationality.[2] As Vattimo points out, this distortion "deprives the metaphysics of its authoritarian character, disregarding its claims to being a knowledge of the stable principles of reality" (1987, 26).

First and foremost, weak thought attempts to weaken the notion of Being as an obvious and undiscussable ontological foundation by developing a vision of Being as transmission, a collection of ontological and linguistic traces always subjected to interpretation and mediation. As Vattimo points out, "Being never really *is* but sends itself, is on the way, it trans-mits itself" (1984, 157). Against the idea of Being as self-evident, grounded, and stable, Vattimo focuses on the transience that characterizes it, stripping it of "the strong traits attributed to it by metaphysics" (1984, 157). As the philosopher remarks in his assessment of Heidegger, "what remains un-thought in metaphysical tradition is [...] Being as an event and not as a stable structure like Plato's *ontos on*" (1987, 26). It is in this context that the notion of *pietas* appears as a key term of Vattimo's theorization, to the extent that the philosopher claims that "[*p*]*ietas* may be another term which alongside *An-denken* and *Verwindung* could characterize the weak thought of post-metaphysics" (1984, 159). In line with a theory that debunks original foundations and final truths, Vattimo's *pietas* does not appear as a moral or categorical imperative but as "an attitude of devoted attention that we adopt towards the values marked by mortality and finitude" (1987, 27). Once Being is recognized as an event which is never fully present and can only be recollected, *pietas* manifests itself as a reaction to its transience and perishability. *Pietas* seems to work as a link between the generality of Being and the specificity of beings, between the instability of Being as a philosophical category which can never be fully grasped and the finitude and fragility of beings as living entities, as "what can be said to be" (Vattimo 1984, 156). Liberated by the twisting of metaphysics and inspired by the fragility and passing of Being,

1 According to Vattimo, "Heidegger explicitly recognizes that metaphysics cannot be left behind us as an error we have to get rid of" since "[t]o overcome it would mean to perpetuate its methods and structures" (1987, 25).

2 Recalling Nietzsche's approach to metaphysics, Vattimo points out that "violence has often been justified with metaphysical foundations (religious, ontological, moral ...)" (1987, 27; my translation).

pietas can turn into a "devoted attention" and care for entities whose mortality and fragility reflect the instability of Being as general category. In Vattimo's words, "[*p*]*ietas* suggests primarily mortality, finitude, and passing away" (1984, 159).

Pietas is not simply a consequence of the instability produced by the weakening of metaphysical foundations but also the starting point for an ethics that hinges on the fragility and mortality of living entities. As Vattimo claims, "[b]onds, respect, and belonging-to are the substance of *pietas*. Along with the rhetoric-logic of 'weak' truth, *pietas* also delineates the basis for a possible [...] ethics of 'values' [*beni*] rather than of 'imperatives'" (Vattimo 1984, 162). Vattimo's "ethics of 'values'" seems to be ingrained in the everyday as "[t]he experience in which we may begin and to which we may remain faithful" (Vattimo 1984, 152). The centrality of *pietas* determines the strong ethical significance of weak thought by bringing its abstract conceptions into a more concrete reality. This potential transpires in Pino Menzio's analysis of weak thought in his article "Pietà, mitezza, felicità dello sguardo" (2015). According to Menzio, the "compassionate attention towards people, things, and events due to their mortality, finitude, and passing away determines an attitude of participation, protection, and care" (124). Bringing Vattimo's philosophical reflections into the microcosm of Belacqua's daily routine in "Dante and the Lobster" might help to assess weak thought's ethical potential when confronted with the experientialism of the everyday and the interactions between entities.

As in Vattimo's theory, Beckett's short story moves away from the idea of pity as a practice dictated by a moral law or by moral prescriptions. On top of that, the story shows pity as an experience unavoidably intertwined with the recognition of the transience and finitude not of Being in general but rather of specific beings grounded in quotidian concerns and frustrations. Due to this focus, "Dante and the Lobster" does not consider pity, as Vattimo does, as an unavoidable result of the weakness of Being but contemplates its potential failure to emerge when faced with the fragility of beings. This is particularly evident when Belacqua is confronted with the choice of whether to eat a lobster once he has found out that the animal will be boiled alive. In the story, the lobster presents a vulnerability which is able to translate a general reflection on weakness into a specific, embodied experience. Belacqua's reaction and Beckett's masterful description of the scene appear as a valuable reflection on how to think about weakness and on the role which pity might play in this conception.

2 Pity in "Dante and the Lobster"

Pity is everywhere in Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster". One of the main subtexts of the story, pity appears in the text both as an abstract concept and linguistic term posing a problem of translation, and as a feeling prompted by different entities—humans, non-human animals, and inanimate objects. On the one hand, a concern with the interpretation and translation of the concept of pity follows Belacqua throughout his day. The character thinks about the popular belief that the spots on the moon are the "first stigma of God's pity" (Beckett 2010, 5) and is preoccupied with the inability to translate Dante's "superb pun" in *Inferno* 20 "*qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta*" (Beckett 2010, 11). On the other hand, the face of the convict McCabe—bound to be hung the following day—and the movement of a lobster before it is plunged into scalding water, cause Belacqua to face pity as a feeling to be experienced and not just conceptualized. These two approaches to pity find resonances with key aspects of Vattimo's weak thought and help to consider the abstract and the potentially more practical side of the theory.

The issue of translation around the concept of pity in Beckett's short story chimes with Vattimo's idea that pity should not be considered a moral imperative but an "attitude of devoted attention" caused by the finitude of Being. The starting point for such issue in "Dante and the Lobster" is a line uttered by Virgil in Dante's *Inferno* 20.28: "*qui vive la pietà quand'é ben morta*." Playing on the ambiguity of the Italian word 'pietà', meaning both 'pity' and 'piety', Virgil's rebuke to Dante for pitying the soothsayers is normally taken to mean that pity for the condemned cannot subsist if piety towards God and his judgments is alive. The remark sets a clear hierarchy that suggests a tension between *pietà* as moral imperative (the piety to be had towards God and his judgment) and *pietà* as an emotional response (pity) to the violence inflicted on the bodies of the damned. Dante is not allowed to feel pity when this feeling contradicts God's divine justice. Lacking an English word able to convey both pity and piety, Beckett and Belacqua's approach to Dante's "supreme pun" is dictated by personal interpretation rather than by accuracy. Opting for an interpretative translation or avoiding translation altogether, Beckett and Belacqua undermine the hierarchy set by Virgil by either placing pity and piety on the same level of importance or by stressing the relation between the feeling of pity and the condition of mortality. In his 1931 poem "Text", written one year before the first version of "Dante and the Lobster" was published in *This Quarter*, Beckett renders Dante's pun as "pity is quick with death" (Beckett 2012, 38). Within a poem in which "pity given and pity withheld are the twin themes" (Harvey qtd in Cohn, 11), Beckett's take on Dante's idea avoids the potential conflict

between pity and piety. Rather than having piety cause the death of pity, Beckett's line stresses the relationship between pity and death, suggesting that pity is quickened by the condition of frailty and transience to which every being is necessarily subjected. Erik Tonning points out that "Beckett's 'pity is quick with death' appears as a wholesale revision of Dante's meaning: 'piety' is here made to seem perverse and inappropriate, whereas the contemplation of residual life-in-death quickens pity" (111). Building on the "outrage at the lack of divine compassion" (Cohn, 390) and stressing instead the fine line between justice and injustice—as Jean-Michel Rabaté claims in *Think Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human*—Beckett dismantles what Virgil took as the unquestionable basis and determinant for the feeling of pity: the acceptance of God's judgment.

In "Dante and the Lobster", Belacqua takes a slightly different approach to Dante's pun while following some similar lines of thought.[3] Prompted by his Italian teacher's question "do you think […] it is absolutely necessary to translate it?" (Beckett 2010, 12), Belacqua gives up on the attempt to faithfully translate Dante's pun. Instead, the character tries to make pity and piety coexist as he wonders:

> Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgment? He thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God on Nineveh. And poor McCabe, he would get it in the neck at dawn. What was he doing now, how was he feeling? He would relish one more meal, one more night.
>
> BECKETT 2010, 13

Against Virgil's rigidity and strictly theological approach to the question of pity in the *Divine Comedy*, Belacqua focuses on the fragility of beings, from the biblical tradition to the actuality of McCabe's death penalty. From a moral imperative dictated by the fear of judgment and the reverence to a higher power, *pietà* starts to be considered as a practice to be nurtured in the face of fragility and mortality. Echoing weak thought's attempt to go against "metaphysics' violent cancellation and removal of the sensible and the fleeting" (Vattimo 1987b, 80; my translation), Belacqua's call for "mercy to rejoice against judgment" has at its core a pity which cannot ignore the mortality of beings. Beckett's "Dante

3 According to Christopher Ricks, "pity is quick with death" "has many filaments to "Dante and the Lobster" (…) "'quick with death,' for pity runneth soon in gentle heart, and because man's pity, unlike 'God's pity', will grant a quick death: but also 'quick with death' as alive with it—and therefore open to corruption" (30).

and the Lobster" constantly stresses such mortality, placing it at the center of its reflection on pity as it highlights the difficulty of moving from intention to action.

3 Weakness of Being in a Purgatorial State

The way in which "Dante and the Lobster" depicts its characters presents some similarities with Vattimo's conception that "Being can only be 'thought' of in the form of recollection, as something that is always already gone" (1987, 26). Following Heidegger's attempt to "let go of Being as foundation" (1984, 159) and conceive of it "as an event [that] cannot be grasped as a presence" (1987, 26), Vattimo destabilizes the metaphysical notion of Being as stable structure solidly situated in a present moment, opting instead for a vision of Being as trace and recollection. Belacqua's Italian teacher Signorina Ottolenghi seems to abide to a similar conception as her "ruinous voice" (Beckett 2010, 11) expresses itself in "past tenses [which] were always sorrowful" (11). To Belacqua's straightforward question "where were we?", following the lesson's interruption by the French teacher, Signorina Ottolenghi answers with what sounds like a broader ontological cry: "'Where are we ever?' cried the Ottolenghi, 'Where we were, as we were'" (13). This strong reaction recalls the opening of the story, which sees Belacqua "stuck in the first of the canti of the Moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward" (3).

The lack of progression—characteristic of Belacqua in Dante's *Purgatorio*—joins Signorina Ottolenghi's look towards a past condition of being in the concept of the 'purgatorial' as defined by Beckett.[4] This idea, expressed by Beckett in his early article "Dante… Bruno. Vico.. Joyce" (1929) appears to be particularly relevant in "Dante and the Lobster" and its ontological approach. According to Beckett, Joyce's "Work in Progress" is "purgatorial […] in the absolute absence of the Absolute" (Beckett 1983, 33). In a process that chimes with Vattimo's weak thinking and its attempt to vitiate metaphysics' strong frameworks, Beckett's concept of the purgatorial leaves behind the stability of the absolute to embrace the "endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the

4 In *Purgatorio* 4, Dante's ascension towards paradise appears in direct contrast with Belacqua's sitting position. Belacqua "sat down, and with his arms did fold his knees about, holding his face between them downward bent" (*Purgatorio*, 4.103–105). Asked by Dante "why thou art seated upright there. Waitest thou escort to conduct thee there?" (*Purgatorio* 4.121–122), Belacqua answers "My brother, of what use to mount?" (*Purgatorio*, 4.123). For an analysis of the intertextual relations between "Dante and the Lobster" and Dante's *Divine Comedy* see Caselli (2005).

cyclic dynamism of the intermediate" (29) which distinguishes the purgatorial aspect of Joyce's work. In this cyclical rather than progressive approach, the intermediate presupposes a present condition that looks back at its germination while already containing and looking forward to its decay. Beckett concludes his essay by comparing Dante and Joyce's purgatories, pointing out the way in which "Dante's is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr. Joyce's is spherical and excludes culmination [...] In the one movement is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance: in the other movement is non-directional—or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back" (33). Without progression there is no culmination, and the movement forward gradually combines with a movement backward towards what has been. In a 1948 letter to Georges Duthuit, Beckett defines a "purgatorial particularity" which emphasizes this attention to what has been: "Connaissez-vous le cri commun aux purgatoriaux? Io fui" (Beckett 2011, 90). The cry of the "purgatoriaux" contains not only a refusal of progress in line with Belacqua's inertia but also a looking backward at a previous state of being that matches Signorina Ottolenghi's cry in "Dante and the Lobster". As Van Hulle and Nixon point out in *Samuel Beckett's Library*, the prominence of the past state in Purgatory returns in Text 6 of *Text for Nothing*—"'I was, I was, they say in Purgatory'—and in *Rough for Radio II*, where Animator characterizes Purgatory as 'the place where 'all sigh, I was, I was'" (111).

Vattimo's reflection on Klee's angel—as analyzed by Walter Benjamin—seems to resonate with this purgatorial context. According to Vattimo, the angel shows "compassion for all that could have been and yet never was, or is no more [...] This compassion follows not from the fact that these relics seem 'precious' in view of some ideal construction, but from the fact that they are traces of something that has lived" (1984, 154). Before his suggestion of having "pity and piety both", Belacqua mulls over Signorina Ottolenghi's past tense: "When we were, thought Belacqua, as we were" (Beckett 2010, 13), using the idea of past traces in the present moment as the starting point for his thinking on pity and piety. The particular conception of Being in "Dante and the Lobster" seems to open up a space for a feeling of compassion which according to Vattimo becomes unavoidable when one is faced with the fragility of Being. Nevertheless, while the purgatorial state of Being in Beckett's short story coincides with Vattimo's weakened Being, things are complicated when the story moves from an abstract conception of Being to the specificities of particular beings. While for Vattimo a general weakening of Being leads to an unavoidable feeling of *pietà*, "Dante and the Lobster" highlights how this fragility might be caused by power dynamics characterizing the relation between entities and might not produce the desired feeling of pity.

4 The Fragility of Inanimate Objects

Beckett's short story constantly emphasizes the fragile ontological condition of human beings, other animals, and inanimate objects. As it places vulnerability at its center, "Dante and the Lobster" gives a posthumanist twist to weak thought, pointing out how a feeling of *pietas* and "ethics of 'values'" might play out once the relationship between different entities is considered. Vulnerability is often seen, in posthumanist studies especially, as a condition which connects humans to other species and which can, as Vattimo's weakened Being, inspire a feeling of compassion. In *Weak Planet*, Wai Chee Dimock highlights the way in which "[h]umans join other species on this common ground, the broadest and most egalitarian, uniting us where we least want to be, amid the age-induced weakness and general susceptibility to harm more likely than not to come our way" (3). According to Cary Wolfe, a posthumanist ethics should be "based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment but on a *compassion* that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity" (141). "Dante and the Lobster" stages this "susceptibility to harm" by infusing the simplest actions with a violence that highlights the vulnerability of entities constantly oscillating between life and death. As Ruben Borg points out, "Beckett mobilizes the motif of death-in-life in a number of images and verbal echoes recurring throughout the text of 'Dante and the Lobster'" (171). For instance, Borg remarks how the lump of Gorgonzola cheese "ought to be 'sweating' and 'alive' but instead turns out to be a 'cadaverous tablet'" (171). At the beginning of the story, the simple action of putting a toaster back to its nail on the wall is described as "an act of dilapidation, for it seared a great weal in the paper [...] The same hopeless paper had been there fifty years. It was livid with age" (Beckett 2010, 6). The consummation of Belacqua's lunch turns from a nourishing act into a violent attack on a piece of soft bread. Described as "spongy and warm, alive" (5), the bread is gradually burnt on a "mild steady flame" (4) until Belacqua will eventually "snap at it with closed eyes, [...] gnash it into a pulp [...] vanquish it utterly with his fang" (6).

The story builds a dense web of allegories and analogies around the fragility of inanimate objects. The preparation of the bread before its consummation acquires the traits of a life sentence as the convict McCabe intrudes in the process, "his rather handsome face" (4) staring at Belacqua from the piece of newspaper he smooths on the table to cut the bread. Once a slice has been cut, "the stump of the loaf went back into prison" (5). The link is strengthened later in the story as Belacqua "pondered on McCabe in his cell" while "tearing at the sandwich and swilling the precious stout" (10). Thus, the incon-

sequential execution of the bread, "done to a dead end, black and smoking" (5), works as a reminder of and emphasizes the fragility of McCabe's condition and his helplessness in front of his death sentence. According to Naho Washizuka, "the world of perceived objects in 'Dante and the Lobster' awakens such a vague mixture of anxiety and pity [...] The loaf of bread that Belacqua slices, toasts, and eats for lunch acts as a tangible reminder of McCabe's life and death" (77). Indeed, the description of objects and their resonance with McCabe's situation infuses the story with a constant sense of fragility which has the potential to awaken pity. However, I would suggest that the unavoidable movement from fragility to pity is not the main focus of the story at this point. Rather than emphasizing how fragility generates compassion, the lunch scene of "Dante and the Lobster" accentuates the way in which Belacqua's carelessness—"What the hell did he care? Was it his wall?" (Beckett 2010, 6)—and violent approach to the objects of his lunch bring their fragility about in the first place. Rather than considering vulnerability and fragility as an intrinsic state common to all beings, the lunch scene highlights the ways in which such fragility and vulnerability can be the product of particular actions and power dynamics ranging from the carelessness of dilapidating a wall livid with age to ordaining a potentially unfair death sentence. Vulnerability as abstract state of being is gradually placed within the realm of concrete everyday actions and decisions, in a movement from the abstract to the concrete which will reach its climax with the final encounter with the lobster. According to Steven Connor, "Belacqua seems to be doing everything he can to avoid the pang of pity [...] What will catch Belacqua off guard in the day is the sudden pathos of the thought of the vulnerable body of the lobster's reassuringly crunchy carapace" (36).

5 A Lobster, Not a Fish

The way in which the lobster is described, and the vulnerability that characterizes it as it is about to be boiled alive, differs from the entities analyzed so far. This difference, as Borg suggests, marks an important distinction between figurative and literal. According to Borg,

> Belacqua's horror at the thought of boiling the lobster alive contrasts with the pleasure he takes in consuming the rotting cheese and metaphorically doing the toast to death. It [...] registers [...] an awareness of the difference between *literal* and *figurative* determinations of life and death. A genuine experience of finitude seizes Belacqua precisely at this point. In

> the fleeting instant, it is harder than ever to sustain the illusion that there might be such a thing as 'life in the abstract'.
>
> 171

The passage from the figurative to the literal is underpinned by the presentation of the lobster not as a mere symbol to represent a general condition of vulnerability but as an entity whose vulnerability is directly linked with the particularity of being a lobster (and not a fish). The story presents here a second issue of translation. While the problem of rendering Dante's "supreme pun" in English was answered by an imaginative rewording of the sentence or the absence of translation itself, the lobster highlights how precision is sometimes key to translation.

Throughout the short story, Belacqua misses the specificity of the lobster by considering it a general fish. As he receives the parcel containing the lobster, Belacqua is confused by the description of the crustacean as 'lepping' but quickly resolves his bafflement through an analogy which aligns the lobster with a general category of beings:

> 'Lepping?' said Belacqua. What on earth was that?
> 'Lepping fresh, sir' said the man, 'fresh in this morning'
> Now Belacqua, on the analogy of mackerel and other fish that he had heard described as lepping fresh when they had been taken but an hour or two previously, supposed the man to mean that the lobster had very recently been killed.
>
> BECKETT 2010, 10

Belacqua's erroneous analogy persists during his Italian lesson. Asked by Mlle Glain, the French instructress, what the bag in the hallway contains, Belacqua replies "a fish" as "[H]e did not know the French for lobster. Fish would be very well. Fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. It was good enough for Mlle Glain" (12). Belacqua's lack of precision in considering the lobster a fish leads to his surprised reaction when he finds out that the lobster is still alive as it reaches his aunt's kitchen to be cooked. As the passage at the fishmonger points out, while fish, no matter how fresh, is still dead when it is sold to the consumer, a lobster is kept alive until it is plunged into scalding water. While mistaking the lobster for a fish was good enough to answer Mlle Glain's enquiry, it is not sufficient to define the specific vulnerability of the lobster as a crustacean about to be boiled alive.

After having seen the lobster move—"Suddenly he saw the creature move, this neuter creature" (13)—Belacqua comments on its living state three times

in quick succession. "'Christ!' he said 'it's alive!'" (13), "'My God' he whined 'it's alive, what'll we do?'" (13), "'[…] it's not dead' protested Belacqua 'you can't boil it like that'" (14). Belacqua's alarmed reactions are in direct opposition with the aunt's composed pragmatism: "'Have sense' she said sharply, 'lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be.' She caught up the lobster and laid it on its back. It trembled. 'They feel nothing' she said" (14). The aunt reinstates the lobster's specificity as a means to justify its violent death, turning the vulnerability of the animal into an unavoidable trait of its being rather than admitting that such vulnerability is caused by a barbaric culinary process. The text deflects the aunt's justification—"they feel nothing"—by framing it with the slight movement of the lobster's body—"it trembled"—and a passage retracing the lobster's dramatic journey from the bottom of the sea to the pot of scalding water:

> [i]n the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It had survived the Frenchwoman's cat and his witless clutch. Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.
>
> BECKETT 2010, 14

The "io fui" of the purgatorial state and the rear looking of Signorina Ottolenghi emerge with sudden force in this passage rendering the life of the lobster as a tragic tale of survival. Shifting away from Belacqua to focus on the lobster's experience, the passage appears as a sort of narrative ruin in the midst of the primary narrative of the short story. It is this narrative remnant, which works as a direct call to pity the lobster as a fragile and vulnerable being, that does not find a clear place in the larger texture of a story mainly focusing on Belacqua. While anthropomorphized into a tragic hero fighting against its enemies, the fragile condition of the lobster is palpable in this excerpt. As Katherine Ebury remarks, "[t]he lobster may be anthropomorphized, but the creature's animal otherness is not forgotten" (441). What is particularly striking about the extract is the way in which the neutral pronoun "it" which places the lobster at the center of the narrative slides back into the impersonal form of the categorical "it had to" that echoes the inevitability put forward by the aunt. The three words "it had to" interrupt the description of the lobster's journey and the feeling of pity which might have developed from it as they move from the vulnerability of the animal to a—self-delusional—unavoidable prescription. In a similar way, Belacqua's feeling of pity towards the lobster is interrupted by a fragile justification that echoes his aunt's reasoning:

> She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.
> Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
> It is not.
>
> BECKETT 2010,14

Belacqua twists Beckett's concept that "pity is quick with death" with the idea that a quick death might not cause any pain to the lobster. The cry "God help us all" turns the focus from the lobster to an insincere general condition of fragility, thus turning pity into self-pity.[5] According to Washizuka, what hinders "Belacqua's journey of 'piety and pity' [...] is a delusive judgment that he passes on the intolerable way the lobster is dying as seen with his own eyes, the snap diagnosis of the suffering creature into which he has projected himself" (81). The last word, however, does not belong to Belacqua but to the narrative voice. As the three words "it had to" obstructed the description of the lobster's journey, three words hinder Belacqua's "delusive judgment".[6] The story ends with a verdict—"It is not"—with which the narrator contradicts Belacqua's statement that the lobster's death will be a quick one. The sharpness of the last three words reinstates the vulnerability of the lobster. It dismantles the idea that boiling the lobster is part of an inevitable course of events while emphasizing the fragility of Belacqua's excuses and good intention of having "pity and piety both". By showing Belacqua's hesitancy in assessing the situation and experiencing pity for the lobster, the end of "Dante and the Lobster" questions Vattimo's belief that *pietà* is an unavoidable consequence of the fragility of Being/beings. Vattimo's "ethics of 'values'" is replaced by what Rabaté defines as the "ethical moment of questioning" (Rabaté, 163). Rather than finding a final resolution in the action of its characters, Beckett's short story remains in an intermediate state of indecision which is itself in line with Vattimo's weak thinking without abiding to the philosopher's optimistic take on pity. By considering pity as a necessity, pity itself risks turning into one of those grounding principles which Vattimo attempts to twist with his weak thinking. As Reiner Schürmann

5 Beckett was aware of the danger of turning pity into self-pity. This was one of the main criticisms directed at Schopenhauer's conception of compassion, a notion Beckett was familiar with. As Van Hulle and Nixon point out, "Beckett marked a long quotation from Jürgen Bona Meyer, relating pity to Buddhism and the notion of 'tat twan asi' [...] Meyer's point is that if one considers all living creatures as part of one being, as Schopenhauer does, pity is not noble at all, but simply a form of narcissistic self-pity" (Van Hulle & Nixon, 146).

6 Beckett (jokingly) points out the importance of having three words instead of four in a comment to Ruby Cohn. Cohn states that "Beckett joked (to me) that he briefly considered amending the end to 'Like Hell it is,' but he preferred three words to four" (Cohn, 391n11).

remarks, "if [Klee's] angel is compassionate because it cannot be other, one must worry indeed" (126). If Belacqua appeared compassionate towards the lobster because that is the unavoidable reaction when faced with the vulnerability of Being, the weakness theorised by Vattimo would turn again into a strong foundation, into a prescription which does not consider the specificity of the particular moment but falls back into the prescriptive 'It had to'. The end of Beckett's short story attempts to focus on the specific vulnerability of the lobster as it weakens seemingly sound reasoning and prescriptions.

The last scene of "Dante and the Lobster" is filled with a rationality whose stability is constantly questioned and a series of judgments whose weakness is palpable. All the apparent foundations of this last scene are dismantled by a movement between contrasting points of view. The vulnerability of the lobster seems to be the only certainty amongst these speculations. By paying attention to the specific vulnerabilities of beings, pity will not emerge as a given or logical necessity. It will, however, at least appear as a possibility not dictated by moral imperatives, as an attempt to deal with the common fragility of beings, and as a measure which is not turned into a commanding principle. If we focus on Belacqua and his failure to act on his frail feeling of pity for the lobster, it might seem as if pity is always doomed to be frustrated. However, this does not seem to be the case in "Dante and the Lobster". The failure of the main character at the end of the story is subtly counterbalanced by another minor character in the story, the only one actively described as experiencing pity as a genuine feeling in the face of fragility. After being subjected to Belacqua's fury for not receiving "a good green stanching lump of Gorgonzola", the grocer selling Belacqua the cheese for his lunch is unable to hold a grudge and instead feels "sympathy and pity for this queer costumer who always looked ill and dejected" (Beckett 2010, 8). With his "spavined gait" and "feet [...] in ruins" (Beckett 2010, 8), Belacqua is included in the list of those fragile beings balancing between life and death. Noticing this fragility and paying attention to what might be its cause will not guarantee an "ethics of 'values'" based on pity. It might, however, open up a space in which individual judgments are not taken as absolutes, and in which speculation and interpretation are able to consider the vulnerability of specific bodies and entities. It might, in other words, generate a post-metaphysical thought in which the traces of a weakened Being emerge as painfully present in individual beings. In a letter to Kay Boyle, Beckett says: "blow up my lobster to whatever dimensions you fancy. All I know is the sudden stir of the bag that told me it was still alive—and suchlike particulars" (Beckett 2014, 48). Abstract speculation can continue as a helpful tool to dismantle the rigid foundations of metaphysics but without losing track of the stirring of beings and "suchlike particulars."

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