

Calm Weathers: Barthes with Beckett

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Calm is a little-theorised but important link between Roland Barthes and Samuel Beckett. Beginning with Beckett, moving onto Barthes, and then interleaving the two, this paper proposes calm as a ‘scandalous’ category not reducible to kindred states like languor or *apatheia*. In dialogue with theorists of repose, such as Kant and de Quincey, calmness becomes less a sedated condition than an interactive process, entailing intense sensitivity to the fluctuations of what Barthes calls ‘the affective minimal’. Artistically generative, this ‘emotive lucidity’ encourages inquisitiveness towards the natural world, and enables in both writers specific writing practices—from lists to notation to haiku.

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On a summer night in 1804, Thomas De Quincey sat looking out over the Liverpool port, watching the ocean in its ‘everlasting but gentle agitation.’ⁱ The calm waters fit his mood. Having taken a dose of opium, he felt a strange ‘sabbath of repose’ come over him, a momentary lull of bustle and burden—in sum: ‘a halcyon calm’. This phrase, from *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), rivets Roland Barthes’ attention. In a May 1978 lecture, he tells his audience that ‘halcyon calm’ is ‘above all what seems important to me in this text’—‘the secret reason I cited it and commented on it’.ⁱⁱ Barthes glosses ‘halcyon’ for his audience as the ‘legendary bird who builds its nest only on a calm sea.’ It’s a description he plucks from Pliny, who notes in *Natural History* that a small blue bird building its nest on the waters is considered a sign that ‘the sea is calm and navigable’ during the winter solstice.ⁱⁱⁱ Barthes is enchanted by the idea of halcyon days—a period of calm

during which the turbulent weather softens.

The connection between states of repose and the weather is not incidental. Originally, ‘calm’ denoted ‘an absence of wind’ and comes to us from Middle English by way of sixteenth-century French and neighbouring Romance languages; in all cases, it is linked to weather conditions. In Old Spanish and Portuguese, it meant ‘heat of the day’ and in Romansh, ‘a shady resting-place for cattle.’^{iv} The word’s origin in a pastoral scene captures something of the pleasures often associated with it, namely a temporary reprieve of activity, worry, irritation, or whim.

While writing this piece, ‘calm’ has become for me, too, something of a ‘mana-word’—Barthes’ name for a term ‘whose ardent, complex, ineffable, and somehow sacred signification gives the illusion that [it] holds an answer to everything.’^v When put into play with near-synonyms like ‘repose’ and ‘tranquillity’, moreover, the word enables a gleam of likeness to appear between Barthes and Samuel Beckett. The two writers share a fondness for states of suspension, for voluntary passivity, and, most importantly, for ‘the desire for nondesire’ (N 68). In the *Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes explicitly links ‘the possibility of *calm*’ with ‘*non-libido*.’^{vi} In the moral hierarchy, he notes, there is the ‘respectable’ form of repose (say, reading for pleasure) and then there is a more ‘scandalous’ iteration: that of ‘*Doing Nothing*’—‘something thought finds unbearable’ (154, 156). But calmness isn’t exactly idleness. There is, as De Quincey suspects, a ‘gentle agitation’ to it. Indeed, he describes his opium-assisted state as a clash between the ‘infinite activities’ of the intellect on the one hand and an ‘infinite repose’ on the other—‘a tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms’ (49). The calmness found in Beckett’s writings—and in Barthes’, too—is less a sluggish condition than a cultivated and contradictory practice.

Yet, as Barthes complains in an April 1978 session of *The Neutral*: ‘whether my calm reassures or annoys, it is never questioned’ (101). Calmness, after all, is hardly the most riveting state, barely narratable. It lacks the arc of amorous pursuit and the intensity of mania—conditions that elsewhere call to Barthes like Lorelei. It seems, moreover, constituted by a cool and disengaged indifference. Understood as a flat, grey, and immobile state, calmness (like the Neutral) gets ‘a bad press’ (69)—that is, when it is not ignored altogether. ‘[N]obody cares to know what [my calm] is made of,’ Barthes laments (101).

The wager of this paper is that we ought to care. Calm, I want to argue, is not only an under-discussed mood, but also a key theoretical category—one that enables a specific writing practice. The methods adopted by these two writers in seeking out and inhabiting halcyonic states vary and encourage different literary devices, from the lulling list to deadpan tonalities to notation and haiku. Beginning with Beckett, moving onto Barthes, and then interleaving the two, this paper poses calm as a ‘scandalous’ category not reducible to the kindred states of stillness, idleness, languor, or boredom—all of which have been richly theorised in recent years. Calmness, I hope to show, is bound up with the sensitive body and encourages a gentle inquisitiveness towards a world that makes contact, flickers, then fades away.

The glittering phial

Beckett’s late period is suffused with clement weathers—the azure waters of *Ping*, the cloudless skies of *Stirrings Still*—and, so, it might appear the place to start. However, I’d like to trace the category of calm to a less obvious place, namely to the micro-trilogy of the middle period. Written and published between 1946 and 1955, three short narratives make up *Stories and Texts for Nothing*: ‘The Expelled’, ‘The Calmative’, and ‘The End’, along with ‘First Love’, written in French at the same time as the other three but not published until

1970. All four were first gathered together for the UK edition under the title *Four Novellas* (1977).^{vii}

‘The Calmative’, published in 1955 as *Le Calmant*, addresses the problem of repose explicitly, as its title suggests. Marjorie Perloff, one of the few critics to write substantially on the text, proposes calmness as the story’s ‘leitmotif’ and reads the quest for it as directly symptomatic of Beckett’s experience of war in Vichy France.^{viii} When we first meet the protagonist, an old transient recycled throughout the micro-trilogy—the ‘same deadbeat’, as Beckett puts it in a letter to his publisher (cited in *FN* xiii)—he is already dead and decomposing: ‘I’m too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot [...] So, I’ll tell myself a story’ (19). The tale he ends up telling is less important than the fact that calmness itself becomes what Barthes calls the ‘phantasmatic object of a demand’ (*N* 105). Witness its insistent incantations:

I’ll try and tell myself another story, to try and calm myself (19)

[I]t would be a sad state of affairs if in that unscandalizable throng I couldn’t achieve a little encounter that would calm me a little (23)

To say it distressed me, no, but I say it all the same, in the hope of calming myself (27)

The demand for calming down, as Barthes notes, nearly always arises from crisis (*N* 105). Indeed, one of the primary denotations of ‘calm’ is a ‘freedom from agitation or disturbance’^{ix}, suggesting the state is constitutively reactive. In ‘The Calmative’, this agitation manifests primarily as social unease, with the narrator meeting a series of terrifying figures. Chief amongst these is a stranger on a bench with shining teeth and a ‘glittering phial’ of narcotics, containing what turns out to be the sedative in the story’s title (*FN* 30).^x Unlike other minor hawking figures—say, the sandwichmen of *Ulysses*—this stranger advertises illicit goods, with a tranquilliser ‘for every taste’. In the 1940s and 50s, during

which ‘The Calmative’ was composed, therapeutics featured insistently in Beckett’s writing. In *Endgame*, the refrain ‘Is it not time for my pain-killer?’, is repeated by Hamm six times. In *Happy Days*, Winnie empties a medicine bottle into her mouth and tosses it behind her, only to lament her loss of pain relief. Moran has a ‘full tube of morphine tablets’ that he calls ‘my favourite sedative’ in *Molloy*. Mr Knott’s hot-pot in *Watt* contains laudanum, while *The Unnamable* is ‘well supplied with pain-killers’ and ‘[draws] upon them freely.’^{xi} Beckett is never quite sure how to refer to the panoply of narcotics that fill his work, but in a letter to Richard Seaver from 21 June 1958, he writes that ‘sedative’ ‘would perhaps [have been] preferable’ to both ‘pain-killer’ in *Endgame* and ‘anodyne’ in *The Unnamable*.^{xii} More than a lexical quibble, Beckett’s revision signals that sedation—the act of ‘making calm or quiet’^{xiii}—goes beyond merely reducing bodily pain; rather, its objective is to numb and muffle feeling.

Beckett’s art is not unique in its fixation on tranquillisers, of course; but it does seem especially sensitive to the emergence in post-war Europe of a new pharmaceutical regime. (Recall Adorno’s line that, in *Endgame*, ‘the news that there are no more painkillers depicts catastrophe.’^{xiv}) Although alkaloids were introduced into psychiatry in 1805 after the isolation of morphine from opium, it wasn’t until the mid-twentieth century that a glut of therapeutic agents became popular in France for their sedative properties, including what Andrea Tone calls ‘the blockbuster tranquilisers’.^{xv} Before this, Tone writes, people tended to rely on ‘unregulated sedatives’ like bromide salts and opiates. Barbiturates—the addictive central nervous system depressants used for their anti-anxiety properties—became widely prescribed during the period in which Beckett was writing ‘The Calmative’; by the time of his death, the consumption of sedatives in France had jumped fivefold.^{xvi}

The insistence on sedation in the middle-period texts has led a number of scholars to argue that for Beckett narration itself is itself a glittering phial—consolatory, even curative.

One critic argues that the stories Malone tells himself are ‘palliative in intent’, in the sense that they ‘serve to distract him from his immediate situations and surroundings. Narrative as a calmative, if you will.’^{xvii} Asja Szafreniec, meanwhile, writes that ‘one is company to oneself but never without the prostheses in the form of stories’ that are told ‘for comfort’.^{xviii} Hugh Kenner anticipates this in his 1961 critical study of Beckett, referring to narrative’s ‘narcotic power’ and quipping: ‘fiction, man's comfort’.^{xix} Plenty of evidence could be marshalled to support this interpretation, including a moment in ‘The Calmative’ when the pill-pushing stranger seizes the tramp. ‘But instead of dispatching me’, the narrator tells us, ‘he began to murmur words so sweet that I went limp and my head fell forward in his lap’ (*FN* 30). The man with the glittering phial, and the ‘caressing voice’, doubles as a storyteller or surrogate for Beckett himself. But the scene—in which the peddler’s ‘sinewy fingers’ close around the tramp’s neck—is hardly comforting. Indeed, I want to resist a therapeutic account of the *Four Novellas*, not because I can’t imagine solace being a driver for Beckett’s writing, but because calmness is far more seditious and frightening—and, importantly, more poetically generative—than such accounts allow.

Dead calm

For Beckett, calmness is a kind of death work.^{xx} The stories Malone decides to tell himself are eerily comatose: ‘They will be neither beautiful nor ugly, they will be calm, there will be no ugliness or beauty or fever in them any more, they will be almost lifeless’.^{xxi} While there is a certain amount of irony here, the micro-trilogy frequent draws this equation between tranquillity and death, evoking a long-standing philosophical preoccupation ranging from quotidian tombstone commands (*requiescat in pace*) to Pascal’s *pensées*: ‘[L]e repos entier est la mort’ (Complete calm is death).^{xxii} Although Beckett’s tramps are marked by their

‘inappetences’ (N 152), they insistently yearn for one thing: a state of ‘utmost serenity’, ‘without thought or sensation’, in which they will be as good as dead (W 180, 201).

This clampdown on feeling is partly responsible for so many critics identifying a ‘frozen, static quality’ to Beckett’s prose, as Peter Boxall describes the late work.^{xxiii} The artistic device for conveying this chloroformed affect, I suggest, is the deadpan, a mode of delivery in which, as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it, ‘[n]o signals are given—no winks or smiles (...), no changes of attitude, bearing, or expression’.^{xxiv} ‘Pan’ being nineteenth-century American slang for ‘face’, the term denotes, according to Calista McRae, a blank countenance that ‘suppress[es] any sign of what one feels’ about one’s circumstances.^{xxv} This posture of dead calm gets taken up across the *Four Novellas*. Here is the narrator of ‘First Love’, at a little length:

I’ll tell them to you some day none the less, if I think of it, if I can, my strange pains, in detail, distinguishing between the different kinds, for the sake of clarity [...], beginning with the hair and scalp and moving methodically down, without haste, all the way down to the feet beloved of the corn, the cramp, the kibe, the bunion, the hammer toe, the nail ingrown, the fallen arch, the common blain, the club foot, duck foot, goose foot, pigeon foot, flat foot, trench foot and other curiosities. (FN 68)

A comic calmness emerges here toward the body’s distress signals, which are scanned and tabulated by the speaker with machinic accuracy. Rather than his tone becoming ‘distorted’ under a ‘distressing affect’, and his ‘voice grow[ing] more shrill’, as Freud describes the tendency of the hypochondriac when listing his pains,^{xxvi} the speaker’s tone flattens: ‘club foot, duck foot, goose foot, pigeon foot, flat foot, trench foot’. Slow, mostly spondaic, the lines create the lightly varied rhythm of a chant or monotone, effectively smoothing out the speaker’s anxious initial hedging and giving him an air of *la belle indifférence*. The phrase, kept in the French original, was used by Freud in his 1895 *Studies on Hysteria* to describe

Elizabeth von R's 'certain amount of unconcern' over her symptoms (leg pain, rather aptly) (136). If hypochondriacs, who abound in Beckett's corpus, are 'figures of fun', as Brian Dillon says,^{xxvii} obsessively monitoring and misreading their symptoms, then hysterics are comical for their unruffledness, their *inattention*. Neutrally cataloguing his heap of podiatric ailments, the speaker of 'First Love' comes to resemble the impassive Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill, Jr*, his house collapsing over him—or, more recently, KC Green's comic 'On Fire', in which a humanoid dog's house burns while he placidly drinks coffee.

What McRae calls 'comic inscrutability' lives precisely in this gap—between a calm expression and atmospheric bedlam. 'The camera returns again and again to a face at odds with what is happening around it, even to it', says McRae of Keaton (11). Importantly, she argues, the deadpan beckons the viewer's attention, rather than confusing or repelling it, actively encouraging curiosity about the subject's inner world. What could be happening behind that 'frozen face'? (12). The answer, for Freud, is nothing much. In his essay 'Repression' (1915), where the phrase *la belle indifférence* reappears, he claims that a 'withdrawal of the libido' in conversion disorder amounts to 'the total disappearance' of emotional perturbation and its concomitant expression.^{xxviii} In his reading, the hysteric's 'vanished affect' marks (at least provisionally) repression's success (114).

It would be perfectly reasonable to query whether this 'hysterical anaesthesia'^{xxix} is *really* calm at all. Indeed, the struggle to distinguish between true calm and its bad twin—what Beckett calls 'mock calm'^{xxx}—has been a recurring feature of theories of repose. Kant, for instance, describes the 'highly commendable' state of *apatheia* as one in which 'the serene mind smiles, scorning black clouds and hoarse thunder.'^{xxxi} This principled form of apathy is important for Kant because it preserves cognition and the capacity for reflection, whereas affect always swamps both. While he intuits that a perfectly passionless sage is a fiction, only to be 'sought for on the moon'^{xxxii}, Kant remains committed to firming up calm's boundaries.

He warns, for example, that it is possible to mistake the virtuous phlegmatic sage for an ‘insensitive’ one, before recalling how the sceptic philosopher Pyrrho ‘saw a pig eating calmly from his trough on a ship in a storm while everyone was anxiously concerned and said pointing to it: “Such ought to be the calm of a wise person.”’ For Kant, both the pig and Pyrrho have only the ‘mien’ of tranquil wisdom, when in fact they are simply—his word—*stupid* (68).

Beckett’s *How It Is* features just such a bathetic attempt at virtuous calm. After encountering an ‘extreme eastern sage’, the narrator proclaims: ‘I too will renounce I will have no more desires.’^{xxxiii} [N]o emotion’, he blankly states (51). But his fingernails grow until they pierce his clenched palms through. Such scenes prompt critics like Nicholas Zurburgg to claim that Beckett’s calm is a form of ‘lobotomised mysticism.’^{xxxiv} This remark, alongside Kant’s eagerness to preserve a principled tranquillity from its compromised kin—one that comically undermines it—is further evidence of the difficulty of carving out a ‘noble’ calm untouched by agitation.

I will extend this point later in the article through Barthes, but I want to stress here that for Beckett calmness is always a mixed state, one wedded to its circumstances. As Jacques Khalip writes, calm ‘depends on a sense of externality’; that is, it’s ‘felt only in relation to another.’^{xxxv} This is not exactly the same thing as saying that calm is reactive ipso facto. Better might be to think of it as *interactive*, with weathers (both inner and atmospheric) that never cease to vacillate. The calm body is always bestirred, however minimally, akin to the ‘gentle agitation’ of the ocean described by De Quincey in *Confessions*. The deadpan expression, then, far from resisting the environment’s pressure on the body, points directly (if negatively) to it. As such, Beckett’s tendency towards coolness is not, as biographers like Deirdre Bair have suggested, entirely temperamental; rather, it is a cultivated position, an

aesthetic posture or sensibility that enables specific formal strategies, such as endless listing and the tonal deadpan, mixed devices that at once lull, perplex, and amuse.

Soothing postures: melting, sinking, holding, floating

Like Beckett's 'extreme eastern sage'—and with a similar 'Orientalist logic'^{xxxvi}—Barthes, too, connects calmness to the fantasy of Non-Action (Wou-wei): 'a desire for a life that, seen from the outside, is unchanging, where there is no struggle, no ambition that anything should change' (*P* 156). This desire, iterated everywhere in late Barthes, is what Anne-Lise François calls a 'minimal affirmative'—that is, a 'vindication of a right to demand little'.^{xxxvii} His 'figure' for this position, which would surely please Beckett, is the heap or the cowpat: '[M]y desire is to be *like an immobile heap*: to lie back, to stretch out and as it were to take root in the house'; 'to be an essence of inactivity' (*P* 158). Yet Barthes insists in his lectures that such postures of repose should not be 'flattened' by being understood as merely passive, as 'letting oneself fall down'—and here Barthes explicitly references Beckett's *All that Fall*, quoting: 'Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big flat jelly out of a bowl and never move again' (*N* 185). Barthes senses that his calm and its poses differ from Beckett's. Taking an inventory, Barthes' hunch seems largely accurate. With him, we have bowed heads, the prayer posture, the sitting or sinking body, the arm-lock or hold in wrestling, all of which of course carry different second-order meanings; with Beckett, on the other hand, we get variations on the theme of bodies flopping, crawling, hobbling, dragging themselves, or lying stock-still. In fact, 'The Calmative' ends with the protagonist lying down in a street, 'sated' with 'calm', and 'indifferent' as a 'friendly stone' (33).

In both cases, calm has a physical shape, a form. According to the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, calm is a 'background emotion': while primary and secondary emotions, like sadness or embarrassment, possess a wide repertoire of facial expressions to identify them

(such as smiles, grimaces), background emotions like repose, tension, and malaise are ‘richly expressed in musculo-skeletal changes; for instance, in subtle details of body posture and overall shaping of body movement’.^{xxxviii} Calm’s corporeal form has long intrigued philosophers. Edmund Burke, for one, describes the body’s shape in the state of amorous repose as the ‘relaxing of the solids’—as ‘being softened’ and ‘melting away’.^{xxxix} Barthes himself is fond of floating, which he calls ‘the most relaxing position of the body’ (*P* 19). More than a personal proclivity, such relaxation becomes incorporated into what Jérôme Meizoz calls Barthes’ ‘literary posture.’^{xl} As summed up by Guido Mattia Gallerani, this term refers to a writer’s public presentation: both through infrastructural dissemination (readings, award ceremonies) and through the writer’s own pronouncements and cultivation of a style.^{xli} Following this logic, the late Barthes encourages the view of himself as a ‘laxist’,^{xlii} repeatedly insisting on himself as calmly immobile. Note the number of photographs in which Barthes is sitting (at his desk, at a lectern, at a panel discussion) or lying down, as on the beach in Biscarosse.

But if Barthes has been recognised as ‘a great theorist of languor’, he is also deemed ‘not a great stylist of it’.^{xliii} There is too much economical focus, says Hanson, too many ‘epiphanic fragments’ to make for a restful style. He argues that even in the long, seemingly languid sentences that wind through *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes can’t help including ‘the pyrotechnical pop and sizzle’, the ‘jarring flash’, such as in this famous passage on the cinematic voice: ‘it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.’ But this idea that the fugitive detail is somehow in contention with languor because it flashes rather than draws itself out, is, in the present context, misguided. In fact, I would make the counter-case: calmness is constituted precisely by these variable rhythms. It shifts, moreover, along a spectrum between gentle agitation and ‘an ardent, burning activity’ (*P* 7). The modifiers and verbs Barthes regularly uses for it—*melting, flowing, wavering, floating,*

shimmering—suggest that the calm body is animated and responsive to its changeable atmosphere, a dynamic to which I will now turn.

Barthes as barometer

Calm's environmental dimension is best exemplified by a short-form genre that fascinated both writers: the haiku. Returning for a moment to Beckett we find that his fiction is peppered with brief but dramatic poetic notations:

[I]n the heat, tending the tomatoes, hyacinths, pinks and seedlings. (FN 63).

Winter evening in the pastures. The snow has ceased. Her steps so light they barely leave a trace. (III 61)

Toads at evening, motionless for hours, lap flies from the air. (FN 53)

These illustrations share not only a 'season word' (snow, heat) or the hint of one (wind) with haiku, but they also tend towards tripling. The last line, in fact, could comfortably be re-written as haiku, just about fulfilling the form's 5-7-5 syllabic arrangement, at least as it's generally lineated in the West. Barthes calls such miniatures 'almost haiku' (*'presque des haïkus'*) (P 53), and he finds them everywhere: in Schehadé, in Apollinaire, in Lamartine, in Proust (27, 51, 56, 53). 'You sad, sad sound of rain on the rain,' goes one by Oscar Milosz (27). Barthes lineates the line, just to see if it passes what he calls the 'substitution test' (51). Confirming his hunch, Adrienne Ghaly notes that this 'minimalist aesthetic performance' of semi-haiku crops up frequently in Francophone novels, essays, and other non-poetic 'forms that poach on it', including Barthes' own *Incidents*.^{xliv}

In his 13 January, 1979 session of *Preparation*, Barthes provided his students with a handout of 63 haiku, some of which he translated himself. Consider this one by Basho, much beloved by Barthes: 'I come by the mountain path / Ah! This is exquisite! / A violet!' (P 78) For Barthes, the anecdotal element of haiku—the small scene of a walk and a flower—

‘pulses’ (P 88). Rather than compressive, its movement is systolic: opening outward, inviting the reader into reverie. As Patrick French writes, Barthes favours the ‘proleptic’ or ‘dilatatory’ gesture of the fragment over the completed whole.^{xlv} Beckett, I’d argue, does too. Indeed, a moment remarkably similar to Bashō’s occurs in ‘The Calmative’, when, after leaving his refuge, Beckett’s speaker steps out into a meadow full of heather and gorse:

little by little I got myself out and started walking with short steps among the trees, oh
look, trees! (FN 20).

This irruption of that ‘oh look’ acts like a ‘mental jolt’ (P 78), as Barthes puts it, swivelling the attention away from plot’s forward march. Borrowing from Neil Badmington on Barthes’ technique of listing, we might say that what Beckett records here is a ‘utopian flicker, a fleeting difference and a fleeting *desire for difference* within monotony’.^{xlvi} Ann Banfield has argued similarly that such interruptions are ‘a blessed antidote to the drug of an endless circulation of likes’.^{xlvii} The disruptive flicker—Beckett’s *oh!*, Bashō’s *ah!*—has a technical name, as Barthes himself knows, namely the *kireji* (or ‘cutting word’), and its agitating force has long been privileged in the European reception of haiku, not least by Pound.^{xlviii} But it’s important to observe that this exclamatory jolt has a calming function, too. In its aftermath, a temporary resting place emerges: a violet, some trees. Michael Stone-Richards would call this the ‘calm of thereness’.^{xlix} And Beckett’s work is full of such soothing facticity: ‘the leaning posts, trembling in the wind, at the end of a glade’ (W 135). Connor rightly observes that matters of facts—those involving nature, especially—often have a ‘suspensive’ effect for Beckett, even a touch of solace.¹ Crucially, this type of calmness occurs when the cogito’s attention is diverted from itself—that is, when it is surprised by the world before it, as when Watt, lying in a ditch at night, hears the frog song that could be the most miniature haiku: ‘Krak! Krek! Krik!’ (117). In such moments, Watt and the reader both are pulled momentarily out of the self’s circuitous monologue, its narcotising feedback loop.

Calmness thus promotes a curious type of awareness, one Barthes calls ‘free-floating attention’ (P 91). De Quincey’s drug-assisted panoramic visions don’t simply ‘anaesthetize suffering’, Barthes writes; they also induce ‘a kind of supernatural awareness’ (164). It’s not clear whether Barthes is relying on Freud’s ‘evenly suspended attention’, which Janet Malcom glosses as the ‘aimless, Zen-like state of desirelessness as [the analyst] listens’^{li}; but his *en plein* notebook practice, or *Notatio*, involves a very similar posture of becoming ‘voluntarily empty’ in order to become lightly attuned. What is important here is that this floating attention enables a calm compositional style. Both the note and the haiku (itself a species of the notation) involve being receptive to, and recording, the world’s fleeting facticity—a ‘capturing of the tenuous’ (P 93). That said, Barthes wants to avoid any clenched apprehensions: ‘A strange and beautiful definition of the writer: ‘*to happen to be there*’, as if he’d been ‘chosen by chance’—a ‘magical mediator’ (100-101). Barthes stresses this contingency, arguing that notation is a *circumstantial* art, not a referential one: ‘a haiku is what happens’, he argues, ‘but only in that what happens *surrounds* the subject—who, moreover, only exists, and can only claim to be a subject, through this fleeing and mobile surrounding’ (52). It’s a rather radical proposition, ecological even. ‘[T]he enunciator’s body’, he says plainly, ‘is *stated* by what surrounds it’ (53). You are no mere observer of your environment, then; rather, you take ‘one step further and you *are* the season, the day, the minute’, Barthes enthuses: ‘you become a *barometer*’ (43). In this Proustian metaphor, the fluctuating intensities and hues are caught by the receptive body, which takes on an ‘expert sensitivity’, as Eve Sedgwick puts it.^{lii} Barthes’ biographer Tiphaine Samoyault refers to such a state as a ‘subtle intoxication’—a ‘hypnagogic stat[e] that favour co-presence without stabilizing meaning’.^{liii}

When Barthes finally gets around to defining what he calls, in quotes, ‘my calm’, he argues that it is a form of ‘emotive lucidity’ (N 101). Far from controlled stillness, calmness

for him entails an awareness of even the ‘smallest shifts of affect’—a ‘hyperconsciousness of the affective minimal’. He is aware of the paradox. In philosophical accounts, calm hardly figures as an awareness, let alone as a ‘gentle ecstasy’ (Samoyault 38). However, for Barthes it’s an almost mystical experience, what he calls a ‘shimmering field of the active and affected body’ (73) or, more simply, ‘feeling-being’ (38). Significantly, this calm attunement favours specific notational forms like haiku, which Barthes describes in strikingly similar terms to his own barometrical body: as being ‘very sensitive’ to ‘subtle intensities’ (40). Considering calmness as a form of emotional lucidity (to the roiling affects as much as to the lambent world) might help to dislodge the category from its place in the canon of ‘merely’ solipsistic emotions, or at least complicate this view.

Thinking with Barthes about how circumstances make the calm, we might cast back to Beckett's deadpan device, observing how a monotonous tone or inexpressive face—while cataloguing ‘strange pains’, say, or having a house collapse around you—actively points to impacts and pressures on the body, rather than denying them. This inexpressivity also touches Barthes’ *Notatio* method, insofar as notation’s formal propensity towards sheer fact or ‘thatness’ makes it both calming and strangely comical. (Barthes notes repeatedly that the flat facts of haiku have a ‘speck’ of humour to them [77].) Any kind of Kantian shielding of a ‘noble’, unruffled calm therefore tends only to raise the spectre of its mock counterpart, with which it’s inevitably mixed. Calmness, as Barthes rightly intuits, is thus a ‘scandalous’ condition. Physical and lightly agitating, it opens one up to the world’s fluctuations like a magical medium or a barometer. It can, at times, make you look a little foolish, like a pig on a ship. But this gentle ecstasy is a form of writing, too—a way of happening to be there, since calmness can’t be willed into existence or zealously pursued, at least not without ludic consequences. The quest for halcyon days, free from any perturbation, is thus full of contradictions and its attainment perennially elusive, perhaps impossible. The blue bird

whose nest-building at sea Pliny took as an omen of good weather—‘a happy forecast’ (*N* 165)—does not exist. But the fact that there is no final repose (besides the *truly* final one) need not be cause for gloom. After all, calm, as Barthes says of the Neutral, ‘is not an objective, a target; it’s a passage’ (*N* 68).

ⁱ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, edited by Robert Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 49.

ⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–78)*, edited by Thomas Clerc and Eric Marty, translated by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 165. Henceforth: *N*. Both the phrase ‘halcyon calm’ and ‘halcyonian calm’ appear in the French translation Barthes is relying on.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. by John Bostock and Henry Thomas Riley (London: H. G. Bohn, 1855), 513.

^{iv} ‘Calm, etym.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2021.

^v Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010), 129. Henceforth: *RB*.

^{vi} Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, edited by Nathalie Léger, translated by Kate Briggs (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 154. Original emphasis. Henceforth: *P*.

^{vii} Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled, The Calmative, The End, with First Love*, edited by Christopher Ricks (London: Faber, 2009). Henceforth: *Four Novellas*, or *FN*.

^{viii} Marjorie Perloff, ‘In Love with Hiding: Samuel Beckett’s War’, *The Iowa Review* 35:1 (2005): 76–103 (95).

^{ix} ‘Calm, n.1.’ *OED*.

^x Fifield points out that Beckett considered translating the French title as ‘The Sedative’ (174). Peter Fifield, ‘Beckett, Cotard’s Syndrome and the Narrative Patient’, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 17:1–2 (2008), 169–86.

^{xi} The references in this section are to: Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 2009), 8, 11, 17, 23, 32, 40; *Molloy*, edited by Shane Weller (London: Faber, 2009), 31; *Watt*, edited by

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- C.J. Ackerley (London: Faber, 2009), 72; and *The Unnamable*, edited by Steven Connor (London: Faber, 2010), 32.
- ^{xii} *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009–16), III, 153.
- ^{xiii} ‘Sedation, n.1.’ *OED*.
- ^{xiv} Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, translated by Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique* 26 (Spring–Summer 1982), 119–50 (136).
- ^{xv} Andrea Tone, ‘Listening to the Past: History, Psychiatry, and Anxiety’, *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 50:7 (June 2005), 373–80 (376).
- ^{xvi} Marlise Simons, ‘Gluttons for Tranquilisers, the French Ask “Why?”’, *New York Times* (21 January 1991).
- ^{xvii} Georgina Nugent-Folan, ‘Samuel Beckett: Going on in Style’, *The Southern Review* 51:2 (2015), 326–44.
- ^{xviii} Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (California, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 189.
- ^{xix} Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York, NY: Grove, 1961), 89, 88.
- ^{xx} Michael Eigen, *Psychic Deadness* (London: Karnac, 2004), 11.
- ^{xxi} Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1955), 180.
- ^{xxii} Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensées*, translated by W. F. Trotter (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 37.
- ^{xxiii} Peter Boxall, ‘Still Stirrings’, *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 33–47 (35).
- ^{xxiv} Cited in Calista McRae, ‘“Now someone’s talking”: Unpunctuation and the Deadpan Poem’, *Modernism/Modernity* 25:1, 1–20 (10).

^{xxv} McRae, ‘Now’, 10.

^{xxvi} Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey et al., 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), II, 136.

^{xxvii} Brian Dillon, *The Hypochondriacs: Nine Tormented Lives* (New York, NY: Faber, 2009), 7.

^{xxviii} Freud, ‘Repression’, *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster), 113.

^{xxix} Lois Oppenheim, ‘A Twenty-First Century Perspective on a Play by Samuel Beckett’, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 17:1–2 (2008), 187–98, 194.

^{xxx} Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said, Company, Etc.*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber, 2009), 59. Henceforth: *Ill*.

^{xxxi} Immanuel Kant, ‘On the Philosopher’s Medicine of the Body’, translated by Mary Gregor, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 184.

^{xxxii} Kant, ‘An Essay on the Maladies of the Head’, translated by Holly Wilson, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 68.

^{xxxiii} Beckett, *How It Is* (London: John Calder, 1996), 59, 62. Original punctuation.

^{xxxiv} Nicholas Zurbugg, *Beckett and Proust* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988), 189

^{xxxv} Jacques Khalip, ‘Dead Calm: The Melancholy of Peace’, *The New Centennial Review*, 11:1 (2011), 243–75, 258.

^{xxxvi} Anne-Lise François, ‘Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives’, in *Theory Aside*, edited by Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 34–55 (39). François offers a vital account of Barthes’s Orientalising tendencies. See also: Marie-

Paule Ha, *Figuring the East: Segalen, Malraux, Duras, and Barthes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

^{xxxvii} François, 'Late Exercises', 35.

^{xxxviii} Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 51, 53.

^{xxxix} Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

^{xl} Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Geneva: Slatkine, 2007).

^{xli} Guido Mattia Gallerani, 'The Faint Smiles of Postures: Roland Barthes's Broadcast Interviews', *Barthes Studies* 3 (2017), 51–78 (58).

^{xlii} Jonathan Culler, *Roland Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 54.

^{xliii} Ellis Hanson, 'The Languorous Critic', *New Literary History* 43 (2012), 547–64 (553).

^{xliv} Adrienne Ghaly, 'Cultural Theory on the Micro-Scale: Roland Barthes's Lectures at the Collège De France', *L'Esprit Créateur* 55:4 (2015), 39–55 (44).

^{xlv} Patrick ffrench, 'How to Live with Roland Barthes', *SubStance* 38:3 (2009), 113–24 (113).

^{xlvi} Neil Badmington, 'Bored with Barthes: Ennui in China', *Textual Practice* 30:2 (2016), 305–25 (316).

^{xlvii} Ann Banfield, "'Proust's Pessimism' as Beckett's Counter-Poison", *The Romanic Review* 100:1–2 (2009), 187–202 (200).

^{xlviii} Grace Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 99.

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- ^{xlix} Michael Stone-Richards, ‘The Time of Subject in the Neurological Field (I): A Commentary on J.H. Prynne’s “Again in the Black Cloud”’, *Glossator*, 2 (April 2010), 149–244 (202).
- ¹ Steven Connor, ‘The Matter of Beckett’s Facts’, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 28:1 (2019): 5–18 (12).
- ^{li} Janet Malcom, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), 26.
- ^{lii} Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldbery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.
- ^{liii} Tiphaine Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 581.

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