A gallery of ‘pudibonds’: Embarrassment in Beckett’s early work and life

‘What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others.’ A name conspicuous in its absence from this Beckett pantheon in 1948 is Belacqua. Though an unanswerable question, it is teasing to consider whether the anti-hero of Dream of Fair to Middling Women and More Pricks than Kicks is subsumed into ‘all the others’ or completely excluded. Given publishers’ initial misgivings and Beckett’s own repudiation of this ‘old shit’, Belacqua and the two books in which he looms large were something of an embarrassment for their creator. But the character and his misadventures were also a depository for Beckett’s own deep and disabling sensitivity to the opinion of others.

Embarrassment is a significant element in Beckett’s early writing and life which has received little attention. While existential embarrassment – from Watt’s risus purus to the awkward laughter Adorno identifies in Endgame – has been an important focus of much scholarship on Beckettian humour, the numerous examples of incidental embarrassment in the early work warrants closer scrutiny.

The first section of this paper is largely biographical and considers the strategies and statements related to embarrassment in Beckett’s two letters to Nuala Costello. Two aspects of Beckett’s protean erythrophobia should emerge: firstly, how defensiveness and proleptic self-revelation are typical of his handling of embarrassment; secondly, how the phrase ‘paraesthesia’ may be read within a framework of self-diagnosis which connects Beckett’s propensity for embarrassment with anxiety neurosis. In the next section, I interrogate the functions of and parallels between embarrassment and indignation in ‘Dante and the Lobster’. Belacqua’s mental attack on Mlle Glain is considered in detail for what it reveals about his
sense of pride, his attempt to save face by merging his identity with that of Christ, and misogyny as an embarrassment-avoidance tactic.