



## Invitation | 'Rhythm and syntax of penury': Samuel Beckett's caesurae

Date: Thursday, 19 March 2020  
Time: 13:00 – 14:30  
Venue: FGG 201

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**Abstract:** In an early review of the 1964 novel, *How It Is*, John Updike cast Samuel Beckett as a 'proud priest perfecting his forlorn ritual'. The charge is not easily dismissed, since there is something arrogant in the writing of a novel that not only demands impossible patience from readers but also great familiarity with the prior body of work. My contention in this paper, however, is that *How It Is* looks askance at old foundations and new turnings, and, in doing so, offers an instance of a text humbling itself.

More specifically, this paper considers the impoverished style of *How It Is* and its caesural operations: prosodic, physical, and philosophical ruptures that give the text its 'rhythm and syntax of penury'. A further aim is to suggest a softening of the dogmatic aesthetic views Beckett espoused about the relation between the artist and the object of art. Such a softening sees the absolute terms 'impotence' and 'insuperable indigence' relativized as weakness and penury.

This is not to say that Beckett abandons his project of aesthetic 'failure', only that the project itself is interrogated. On this view, weakness and penury facilitate humility in their resistance to a writing that has the potential to become what it opposes: a totalizing poetics.



**Bionote:** Dr Rick de Villiers is a lecturer in the Department of English. His first monograph, *Eliot's and Beckett's Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation* (Edinburgh University Press), is due to appear in 2021.