This chapter will consider the relative positions of friends and neighbours in selected works by Gustave Flaubert, Samuel Beckett and Marie NDiaye. It begins by noting that these types have a reciprocal structural function in all three writers, with particular implications for how the writers conceive subjectivity, politics and aesthetics. The relationship between two friends becomes a triad with the inclusion of a neighbour. This triad is a common vehicle for examining aesthetically the intersubjective and political significance of relationships at varying degrees of nearness. Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye are linked by a common tendency: they show how this triad fails. In order to establish the subjective, political and aesthetic ideals they are ‘failing’ to achieve, it moves from structural analysis to humanist tenet.

Each writer’s work shows a failure of a sentiment encapsulated by the Roman playwright Terence in the second century BC as ‘je suis homme et rien d’humain ne m’est étranger’. When we return the phrase to its original context, it becomes evident that the history of the ‘Je suis homme: rien de ce qui
intéresse un homme ne m’est étranger’ is a history of failures and occlusions. For, if the phrase took on a precise humanist significance when Montaigne famously inscribed it into a bookshelf of his library, this significance is at odds with the comic situation in which Terence originally uses it in *Heautontimoroumenos* [The Self-Tormentor]. In brief, Chremes, neighbour of Menedemus, is intrigued when he sees Menedemus toiling in his own fields. Menedemus is a rich man, with many servants. Why, Chremes asks Menedemus, are you working as a common labourer? Menedemus retorts: ‘Have you so much leisure, Chremes, from your own affairs, that you can attend to those of others – those which don’t concern you?’ Chremes’s response is the famous ‘Homo Sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto’.

In Ronald Strickland’s succinct summary: ‘it is spoken by a busybody in response to his neighbour’s suggestion that he mind his own business’. What Strickland does not add is that, with Chremes’s friendly solicitation, Menedemus explains that he is deliberately tormenting himself because he has driven his son away, and must punish himself with similar hardships. The phrase combines the complexity of a busybody neighbour, a friendly overture, and an explanation of wilful self-abnegation.

Terence’s phrase incorporates a basic ambiguity that permits its interpretation as either humanist or anti-humanist. The double alienation, precipitated by the use of the negative (‘rien d’humain’) and the foreign (‘étranger’), has several implications. Since nothing human is foreign to me, it may be that everything human is near to me, or my neighbour. However, it may also mean that it is specifically the nothing-human from which I am alienated, or which I will push away. I prove my human interest in my neighbour by alienating all that is not strictly human about his situation. The irony of the phrase is that it is precisely the human (Menedemus) that does not concern Chremes; he musters the line to justify his interest in the situation. Chremes, the busybody neighbour, is more interested in Menedemus’s problem than in Menedemus. Menedemus then occupies a tricky position in the disparity

(And his unnamed source) are the only translations to reproduce the phrase in a clipped hexameter, with the marked ‘rien d’humain’.


7 Ronald Strickland, ‘Nothing that is human is alien to me: neoliberalism and the end of Bildung’, *RiLUnE*, 1 (2005), 29.