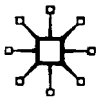
Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity

Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity

Shane Weller

School of European Culture and Languages
University of Kent, Canterbury

palgrave
macmillan



First published in 2006 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978–1–4039–9581–0 hardback
ISBN-10: 1–4039–9581–8 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weller, Shane.
Beckett, literature, and the ethics of alterity / Shane Weller.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1–4039–9581–8
1. Beckett, Samuel, 1906—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Other (Philosophy) in literature. 3. Criticism–20th century. I. Title.

PQ2603.E378Z96 2006
848'.91409—dc22 2005056412

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity

Other related titles

PALGRAVE ADVANCES IN SAMUEL BECKETT STUDIES – ed. Lois Oppenheim (2004)

BECKETT AND PHILOSOPHY – ed. Richard Lane (2002)

BECKETT'S EIGHTEENTH CENTURY – Frederik N. Smith (2001)

BECKETT AND EROS – Paul Davies (2000)

For L.

Preface

A long and highly influential critical tradition, grounded in the notion that a certain kind of literary practice constitutes a genuine resistance to nihilism, finds one of its major points of origin in the work of Theodor Adorno, for whom Beckett's *œuvre* possesses exemplary value. As I sought to demonstrate in *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, since Adorno's championing of Beckett in the early 1960s the latter's works have repeatedly been deployed to the same end by some of the most important philosophers and literary theorists of the postwar era, including Blanchot, Derrida, Deleuze, Cixous, Cavell, and, most recently, Alain Badiou, who, ironically, sees himself as countering the latter-day sophists (including Blanchot and Derrida) with whom he none the less joins ranks in his conception of Beckett's resistance to nihilism. If, in each case, the nihilism against which Beckett's works are taken to stand is defined differently, there remains the shared sense that not only literature but also thought itself is to be conceived and evaluated in terms of a struggle against that which, since Nietzsche, has gone by the name of 'nihilism'.

In this book, my principal aim has been to explore the works of Beckett and others in a manner that is less polarized by the nihilist/anti-nihilist model, but that does not assume either the possibility of an analysis of literature that would be clearly distinguishable from the ethical, or the possibility of a literary practice that would have, as Blanchot argues in his 1963 preface to *Lautréamont and Sade* (1949), a power of affirmation wholly liberated from the notion of value.[1] That towards which I have sought to direct the reader's attention here, in my analyses of the ethics of translation, comedy, and gender in Beckett and others, is what I have termed the *anethical*. This is to be distinguished from, although not necessarily to be thought as either prior or posterior to, the 'ethics of alterity' or 'ethics of difference' that has come to dominate what is generally termed 'postmodern' thought, but which, for reasons that should become clearer in the course of this study, might more accurately be described as post-Holocaust thought. If I have chosen to explore the anethical here in relation to the three, interrelated topics of translation, comedy, and gender, this is not because I consider these topics to exhaust either the field of the anethical or indeed Beckett's own treatment of alterity. Far from it. Indeed, among the many other topics that

might be explored in a broadly similar manner, one of the more obvious would be unreason or madness – or what Beckett in his last work, 'What is the Word' (his own translation of the poem 'Comment dire'), terms 'folly' (*folie*).

If, at times, the analyses undertaken in this book appear to exhibit an aggressivity at odds with the life or the spirit of both literature and literary criticism, this should not be taken as a sign that the various works to which I am responding here are, in my eyes, either insignificant or simply misguided contributions to their various fields. Indeed, with regard to works of Beckett criticism in particular, I have for the most part restricted my reflections to readings that have shaped the contemporary understanding of Beckett. That said, my attempt to take issue with a prevailing sense of the ethical – and, in particular, the ethicality of a certain kind of literary practice – has made it difficult to avoid what will on occasion no doubt appear to be acts of critical violence. Were I to attempt to justify this violence, then this justification would open with the counter-claim that no reading, no interpretation, no response to any work, literary or otherwise, is ever free from such violence. If I do not seek to justify the critical violence in this work in terms of a given reading's factual or interpretative value, then this has everything to do with the experience of the anethical that I have sought to adumbrate in the pages that follow.

Justifiable or not, this violence is of course, among other things, a sign of my own debts, the most easily identifiable of which are recorded in the bibliography, which includes all those works from which I have quoted. For permission to include Walter Benjamin's German translation of Baudelaire's 'Les Aveugles', I express my gratitude to Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main. Chapters 1 and 4 originally appeared in slightly different forms in *Angelaki* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies* respectively, and I wish to thank the editors of those journals for permission to reproduce the material here. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to Matthew Feldman for his generosity in making his own research on Beckett available to me prior to its publication in book form.

Contents

Introduction
Literature and Alterity

Alterity in the Holocaust's wake: Adorno

For all their diversity, the various strains of postmodern thought, and in particular postmodern theories of literature, share a concern for difference that is never simply analytic or descriptive. And, in their affirmation beyond the limits of any thematization of forms of alterity so radical that they resist dialectical mastery and indeed all thinking governed by a principle of identity, they arguably mark their adherence to a particular historical moment. That this is the case is suggested by one of the most forceful advocates of modernism, Theodor Adorno, who in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) argues not simply that Western philosophy has hitherto predominantly taken the form of identity-thinking, but that the philosopheme underlying this procedure finds its confirmation (*Bestätigung*) only in Auschwitz, that synecdoche for the Holocaust which challenges the universalizing ambitions of philosophical discourse: 'Auschwitz confirmed [*bestätigt*] the philosopheme of pure identity as death' (Adorno 1973, 362). If one accepts Adorno's contention, then however radically one might tamper with the commonsense notion of history as a more or less coherent diachronic sequence, and even if one defines the postmodern, as Lyotard does, as that which both precedes and makes possible the modern,[1] the postmodern remains a strictly post-Holocaust phenomenon, since only in the Holocaust's wake does it become possible to confirm the thesis that identity-thinking constitutes the greatest threat to human – and not just human – life and its value.

That nihilism which Nietzsche so momentously declares to be the 'uncanniest of all guests' (*unheimlichste aller Gäste*) in a fragment from 1887 later included in *The Will to Power* (1901), and which he is the first

to identify as the essence of philosophy at least since Plato, would confirm itself at Auschwitz to be not merely (as Nietzsche claims) a devaluation of the highest values, nor even (as Heidegger claims) the forgetting of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), the thinking of Being (*Sein*) as a being (*Seiendes*), but the radical nihilation (*Nihilisierung*) of the other, the attempted reduction to nothing of an alterity that in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century is figured (for reasons that go beyond the purely philosophical) predominantly, although not exclusively, as 'the Jew'. The Holocaust, then, becomes both the confirmation and the consummation of European nihilism, its *telos* if not necessarily its end, as recent history so obviously testifies. And if one accepts the deliberately crooked logic of Derrida's deconstruction of what he terms 'Western metaphysics', nihilism is the attempted reduction to nothing of an alterity that is both the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of identity. Remaining within the aporetic logic of Derrida's thought, one could press still further, and argue that nihilism may be defined as the nihilation of an alterity that can be shown to be irreducible, not just beyond all possible negation but beyond the very dialectical opposition of affirmation and negation, beyond the power of what in *Glas* (1974) Derrida terms the 'all-burning' (*brûle-tout*) (Derrida 1986, 238).

Given this perceived relation between the nihilistic appropriation of alterity within metaphysical thought and the historical reality of genocide, it is scarcely surprising that most attempts to think the post-metaphysical or the postmodern, and in particular most attempts to think the possibility of a post-metaphysical or postmodern ethics, have been orientated by an (albeit highly paradoxical) effort to identify an irreducible alterity, or (less often) alterities, not only within the discourse of philosophy itself but also in, or as, art or literature. In a paradox the significance of which is still far from easy to calculate, that privileging of the aesthetic so characteristic of the modern also characterizes the discourses of the postmodern, with the aesthetic now becoming that realm in which it remains possible to encounter what Thomas Docherty terms 'substantial *alterity*' (Docherty 1996, vii). So it is that in the postmodern the aesthetic, for all its reinscription, remains no less tied to the ethical than it does in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), in which the gulf between the realms of necessity and freedom is to be negotiated by the aesthetic.

Put bluntly, the history of post-Holocaust thought is the history of the attempt to think a saving alterity. Anticipating in important respects Derrida's conception of *différance*, Adorno thinks this saving alterity not as anything substantial but rather as a slightest difference (*kleinste*

Differenz) within the negative, a difference that Adorno finds disclosed above all in the works of Samuel Beckett, who, for Adorno as for many more recent commentators, is never simply one example among others. Adorno identifies this difference as a no man's land (*Niemandsland*) situated 'between the border posts of being and nothingness', an interval that is not to be confused with Heidegger's ontological difference, since it is a difference within the same, a difference between nothingness (*das Nichts*) and having come to rest (*zur Ruhe Gelangten*) (Adorno 1973, 381). For Adorno, this scarcely discernible difference is the post-Holocaust world's sole haven of hope (*Zuflucht der Hoffnung*), anticipating in a negative form an as yet unrealized, and perhaps even historically unrealizable, reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), an overcoming of antagonisms that is neither integrative nor totalizing, is not governed by a principle of identity, does not negate alterity, but saves difference in its multiplicity rather than in its conflictual binarity. The reconciliation of which he dreams 'would release the nonidentical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualized coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconcilement [*Versöhnung*] would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical [*feindseligen*], a thought that is anathema to subjective reason' (Adorno 1973, 6). Adorno, then, remains important beyond any debate as to the relative values of various kinds of aesthetic practice because he is among the first in the post-Holocaust age to think the possibility – or at least the reasons, not simply historical, political, or economic, for the present impossibility – of a non-integrative reconciliation, a multiplicity in which alterity survives within a non-violent economy. And crucially, for Adorno as for so many others after him, it is art – and above all the works of Samuel Beckett, strange as this might seem – that can grant the post-Holocaust world the negative image, the only possible image, of this utopian reconciliation in what Adorno characterizes as the nihilistically positivistic present.

From one to the absolutely other: Levinas

If Adorno's influence on the various strains of post-Holocaust thought has been considerable, despite his championing of the modernist over both the realist and the postmodernist in the arts, it is Emmanuel Levinas who has proven to be arguably the most influential thinker of alterity, and indeed of the relation between literature and ethics, in post-Holocaust Europe. Levinas's attempt to conceive an alterity beyond the principle of identity received what he later termed its 'birth and first

formulation' in *Time and the Other* (1948), originally delivered as a series of lectures at the Collège Philosophique in Paris in 1946–47, and developing the analysis of time and alterity in the final chapter of *Existence and Existents* (1947). This first formulation of an ethical philosophy of the Other receives its two most significant reformulations in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). If Levinas shares with Adorno a concern for both difference and reconciliation, his distance from Adorno lies most obviously in his characterization of the absolute alterity of the Other (*autrui*) in terms of inequality, transcendence, infinity, and responsibility.[2] The 'main thesis' of *Time and the Other* consists 'in thinking time not as a degradation of eternity, but as the relationship to *that* which – of itself unassimilable, absolutely other [*absolument autre*] – would not allow itself to be assimilated by experience; or to that which – of itself infinite – would not allow itself to be com-prehended [*com-prendre*]' (Levinas 1987, 32–3). Only if the other is thought as *absolutely other* can an ethics as first philosophy counter the history of philosophy as that project to achieve a totality or 'universal synthesis' which reaches its culmination in Hegel (Levinas 1985, 75), the absolute mastery of thought as knowledge or Reason (*Vernunft*), the political equivalent of which would be totalitarianism.

Although the term 'nihilism' does not appear in *Time and the Other*, and although he tries assiduously to keep his distance from Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, it is clear that for Levinas the history of philosophy (as the history of the attempt to accomplish the reduction to nothing of alterity) is in fact the history of nihilism defined as unethical thought. The accomplishing of a universal synthesis at Auschwitz is, then, not just the confirmation but also the consummation of nihilism. Whereas for Heidegger, from whose fundamental ontology Levinas strives to distance his own philosophy as ethics, nihilism consists in the reduction to nothing of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), for Levinas nihilism consists in the reduction to nothing of the absolutely other. No less than Heidegger's fundamental ontology, then, Levinas's ethics as first philosophy is the attempt to resist that nihilism which he locates at the very heart of metaphysics.

According to Levinas, there have been scarcely any protestations against this nihilism, the work of Franz Rosenzweig being one of the very few. Here, it might seem justifiable to object that the existentialism originating in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and passing (arguably, in a series of misreadings) by way of Heidegger to Sartre, is patently nothing other than the philosophical attempt to think in a manner that is non-systematic,

non-totalizing, and thus non-totalitarian; in short, an attempt to resist Hegel. For Levinas, however, existentialism remains the other face of the Hegelian project, since it locks us within a kind of microcosmic totality: the individual in its essential solitude. For this reason, the alterity that Levinas thematizes in *Time and the Other* is the key to a philosophy that is at odds not only with metaphysics from Parmenides to Hegel, but also with Heidegger's ontology and the Sartrean existentialism that derives from it. That Sartrean existentialism might be grounded in a very basic misunderstanding of Heidegger, as Heidegger himself argues in his *Letter on Humanism* (1947), would be of no real significance here, since Levinas sets out to define his first philosophy in contradistinction to both Hegel and Heidegger, both of whom remain tied, as he sees it, to the principle of identity, the Parmenidean thought of the One, and both of whom fail to think the other in its absolute alterity. Furthermore, Levinas's insistence that first philosophy is an ethics is an unambiguous rejection of Heidegger's declaration in the *Letter on Humanism* that fundamental ontology precedes ethics.[3] That said, Levinas remains perilously close to Heidegger in some of his key formulations, and never more so than in his thought of the 'there is' (*il y a*), which both translates and marks a departure from Heidegger's thinking of Being as *es gibt*.

In both *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, Levinas argues that in *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger's conception of Dasein's being towards death, and of death as 'the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein' (Heidegger 1962, 294), fails to take account of death's radical impossibility, which is to say the impossibility of nothingness (*néant*). In short, Heidegger fails to think existence without existents, and may therefore be accused (although Levinas himself does not make this accusation) of having collapsed the very ontological difference between Being and beings that *Being and Time* is supposed to reopen. Once one thinks the possibility of existence without existents, it becomes clear that beyond any possible negation there will always remain an irreducible 'there is' (*il y a*), even if nothingness is precisely all that *there is*. As death's impossibility, this *il y a* is the 'fatality of irremissible being' (Levinas 2001, 57). It differs from Heidegger's thinking of Being (*Sein*) in that it is the scene of being (*la scène de l'être*) rather than an event of being (*un événement d'être*) (Levinas 1985, 48–9). Essentially impersonal or anonymous, the *il y a* can be described only in a language of paradox in keeping with its 'fundamental absurdity' (Levinas 1987, 51): 'The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence' (Levinas 1987, 46).

It is precisely the irremissibility of the *il y a* that distinguishes it from the Other as absolutely other, since one can always kill the Other: 'the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity' (Levinas 1985, 87). That said, although the *il y a* is irremissible, it can be escaped. Indeed, Levinas's entire philosophy will be the attempt to think this departure from the absurd horror of the *il y a* by way of an ethical relation with the Other, a taking responsibility for the Other, and ultimately a taking responsibility for the death of the Other. It is precisely this escape from the *il y a* by taking responsibility for the death of the Other that makes the fundamental philosophical question not the ontological question posed by Leibniz, 'Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?', with which Heidegger opens his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), but rather the ethical question: 'Do I not kill by being?' (Levinas 1985, 120). Although Levinas himself does not remark upon this fact, the thought of being as killing – or, more precisely, of both being and non-being as dependent upon the killing of the other – is, as we shall see, one that lies at the heart of Beckett's *œuvre*, as does the sense that suicide, as what Levinas terms 'the final mastery one can have over being' (Levinas 1987, 50), is in fact not an effective means of escape from that fatality of irremissible being which both Levinas and Beckett figure as the voice – more precisely, the murmur – of silence.

To enter into relation with the Other is, then, not just to escape from that solitude of being which is a founding tenet of existentialism and has such an important role to play in Beckett's *œuvre*, but more essentially to escape from an *il y a* that is neither an event of being nor nothing. It is to escape from the absurd fatality of irremissible being into the ethical, from an ontological questioning of the *il y a* into an ethical questioning of being in relation to the absolutely other. That this notion of a leap into the ethical generates formidable complications is apparent as soon as it is borne in mind that escape is itself a form of negation. If the *il y a* can be escaped or left behind, then it is not simply irreducible or irremissible. Furthermore, given that the relation to the *il y a* is not an ethical relation, is not strictly speaking an exigency, and is not a relation of knowledge, or ecstasis, or even (as the relation with the Other will be) an erotic or a paternal relation, but rather a relation of horror, one might argue that the *il y a* itself is in Levinas an unthought other that is in fact far more radically alterior than the Other (as *autrui*) with which one enters into ethical relation. Put slightly differently, the *il y a* might be said to be that other from which Levinas's own ethics of alterity will be in constant flight.

Before looking more closely at the place and status of the *il y a* in Levinas's reflections upon the relation between literature and alterity, it

is worth sticking for a little longer with Levinas's argumentation concerning the escape from the *il y a* by way of the ethical relation with the Other. As we have seen, paradoxically it is the very experience (as horror) of the impossibility of nothingness, and thus of the irreducibility of the *il y a*, that is the first step in the escape from the *il y a*, the muffling of its murmurous silence. Were it not for that initial sense of the *il y a*, there would be no possibility of transcendence, since it is the very impossibility of nothingness that makes of death itself the first form of absolute alterity: 'Death is the impossibility of having a project. This approach to death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other [*absolument autre*]' (Levinas 1987, 74). This relation with the absolutely other in the form of death becomes a first step in the escape from the *il y a*. As Levinas puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, albeit with the significant, if problematical, reservation of an *as though* and a limitation of death as but one modality among others, it is 'as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other' (Levinas 1969, 234).

As for the Other as absolutely other, it is 'something bearing alterity [*l'altérité*] not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity' (Levinas 1987, 74). Our relation to this absolute alterity is itself highly paradoxical, and unlike any other; it is what Blanchot will term a 'relation without relation', a relation with that over which we can exercise no cognitive mastery: 'If one could possess, grasp, and know the other [*l'autre*], it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power' (Levinas 1987, 90). Inexhaustibly resistant to comprehension, appropriation, or integration, the alterity that Levinas is attempting to think here is also alien to any mystical ecstasis, since in ecstasis 'the subject is absorbed in the object and recovers itself in its unity' (Levinas 1987, 41). In both cognition and ecstasis, the Other disappears as other, and with it disappears the possibility of an ethical relation. And yet, such is the paradoxicality of our relation with the Other that, while we cannot master it, and while our relation to it is radically asymmetrical and unequal, we are none the less responsible for it.

If the Other as absolutely other can become the object of neither a knowledge nor an ecstasis, is neither an alter ego nor anything with which one can enter into a reciprocal or equal relationship, then what form might it take, beyond that of death? In short, how is this absolute alterity to be figured? It is in responding to this question that Levinas articulates a process with an unambiguous trajectory, leading from the *il y a* in all its horror to God – in other words, from the depths to the

heights, from fundamental absurdity to infinite transcendence. Aside from death, the two forms that absolute alterity will take in *Time and the Other* are the feminine and the son (*fils*), with the corresponding ethical relations being the erotic and the paternal. If alterity begins with death, it 'is accomplished [*s'accomplit*] in the feminine' (Levinas 1987, 88). Why in the feminine? As Simone de Beauvoir was among the first to observe, Levinas's argument here appears to be determined by his unanalysed inheritance of an entire tradition's conception of woman as other: 'Hiding is the way of existing of the feminine, and this fact of hiding is precisely modesty' (Levinas 1987, 87).[4] That said, the feminine here is not to be mistaken for an existent; rather, it is an event of alterity (*événement de l'altérité*) (Levinas 1987, 87). And the relation with this event is not visual but tactile: it takes the form of the caress (*caresse*). To caress is not to touch, in that it is a seeking governed by unknowing and directed openly not towards contact but towards that which remains for ever to come (*à venir*), alien to any possible present:

> The seeking [*recherche*] of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing' [*'ne pas savoir'*], this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away [*comme un jeu avec quelque chose qui se dérobe*], a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [*à venir*]. (Levinas 1987, 89)

Levinas is at pains here to distinguish his conception of the feminine from Plato's. Not only is the feminine not to be thought as passivity or matter, but the erotic relation to the feminine is non-reciprocal, non-fusional, non-communal, and not even a mode of 'being with' – it is not covered by Heidegger's *Miteinandersein*. In the face-to-face (*face-à-face*) with the Other, there is neither identification nor communication, but rather, and solely, responsibility. In other words, the feminine as absolutely other is never responsible for itself. Responsibility is always responsibility for the feminine.

Just as the relation with the Other constitutes an escape from the *il y a*, so the passage from death to the feminine is a transcending negation, a victory over death (*victoire sur la mort*). In paternity, the relation with the Other reaches a still higher stage. It lies beyond that relation achieved with the feminine because now the ego itself becomes other than itself, becomes its own unmasterable other, which is never the case