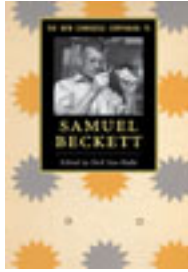


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# I 2

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## Love and Lobsters

### Beckett's Meta-Ethics

For **Beckett**, the question of ethics is posed by a voice that displays the author's prerogative, that is absolute power – a power to interrupt his own tale by an intrusive negation, bringing the fiction to an untimely end: a short story, after all, not a novel. This happens at the close of 'Dante and the Lobster': 'She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live. Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all. It is not' (*MPTK* 14). Belacqua has fetched a lobster for a dinner to which his aunt has invited him. Believing the 'beast' to be dead, he brings it along as he takes an Italian language lesson with Professor Adriana Ottolenghi, and is surprised when the French teacher's cat tries to catch it. He only discovers that the lobster is alive when he reaches his aunt's kitchen. The extraordinary concision of the ending combines Belacqua's bafflement about Dante's speculation that spots in the moon exemplify divine compassion for Cain and quotidian issues, like: Do we have the right to kill animals in order to eat them? The aunt feels no qualms in boiling a lobster alive and even derides Belacqua's queasiness, knowing that he will devour the lobster once properly cooked and served.

Would the story have been as effective if Belacqua and the aunt had opened and shared a dozen oysters? Probably not, even if one had been reminded that oysters have to be eaten alive. What triggers the ethical shock is the hero's empathic identification with an animal whose struggles he tries to relive: 'In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. [...] It had survived the French-woman's cat and his witless clutch. Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath' (*MPTK* 14). However, the question is not simply whether it is wrong to boil lobsters alive, nor worry about their pain when plunged in boiling water – thus whether it would be humane to kill them before boiling them – but more broadly how to reconcile a grand scheme of things in which we move from God's compassion facing Cain to scenes of sadistic violence in the *Inferno* where we meet damned souls who are plunged in boiling blood, as

with the violent souls of the Seventh circle of Hell, with mundane or everyday life concerns.

In *A Beckett Canon*, Ruby Cohn explains that Beckett told her that he wanted to change the ending to: ‘Like Hell it is’, but preferred to keep three words instead of four (2001, 391, n. 11). The formal determination by linguistic concision was wise: the echo would have been too obvious, mirroring the position of Belacqua halfway between Hell and Heaven, ‘stuck’ not only in difficult glosses of the moon Canti but also placed in the mediating space defining Purgatory. Yet, we note that even with the rejected change, the negation would not affect ‘God help us all’. The fact that such suffering exists and moreover should have a role in a divine scheme is never questioned. Here is the basis of Beckett’s ethics: it deploys itself between a religious realm, whether God exists or not, since this is not the question, and the very actuality of a phenomenology of suffering (see Tanaka, Tajiri, and Tsushima 2012).

The interrogation about the function of pain in what may be called a system of divine sadism reappears in ‘Text 3’, an early poem investigating the complex interaction of pain, pity, and divine justice. It begins with the first word spoken to Virgil by Dante the character: ‘*Miserere*’. This word is not in Italian but in Latin: ‘*Miserere di me*’ (‘Have pity on me’, *Inferno*, I, ln. 65) allows us to glimpse Dante’s synthetic language, which announces Joyce’s experiments. But here it is Proust, not Joyce, who is quoted:

Proust’s cook is in the study,  
 she is grieved in a general way for the abstract intestine.  
 She is so engrossed that she does not hear the screams of her assistant,  
 a sloven she,  
 and the dying spit of a Paduan Virtue,  
 for alas she has stripped her last asparagus,  
 now she is smashed on delivery.  
 She rises,  
 her heart is full of murder and tears,  
 she hunts down the pullet with oaths,  
 fiercely she tears his little head off. (‘Text 3’, CP 38)

Proust’s famous portrayal of Françoise, a fixture in the family at Combray, is the starting point for a meditation on the juxtaposition of goodness and sadism, on the compound of cruelty and compassion marking all his characters. Françoise has an assistant, a younger kitchen maid who happens to be both sickly and pregnant, and whom Françoise tortures mercilessly, finally forcing her to leave. The narrator’s family is surprised to be served asparagus prepared in all possible ways at all their meals: Françoise knows that the kitchen maid is prone to asthma attacks when peeling them (Proust 2002,

127). At another time, the kitchen maid is screaming in pain after her difficult delivery; Françoise grudgingly fetches the book describing her ailment, but never comes back to help the poor woman. She is discovered plunged in the book, full of general compassion for the girl's pain: 'Oh dear, Holy Virgin, it is possible that the good Lord would want a wretched human creature to suffer so?' (125). Yet, just before, the narrator had surprised Françoise in the kitchen; since she was deprived of her usual helper, she had to prepare dinner and kill a recalcitrant chicken. Furious, she cried out repeatedly: 'Vile creature!' ('*Sale bête!*', 124). Even when the animal was beheaded and its blood collected for appetizing sauces, the oath was repeated. Shocked, the narrator slides away and decides to get her sacked – then considers that without her, he would not get his usual delicacies, and pardons her.

Beckett's poem insists on the gruesome aspects of Françoise's cruelty, whereas Proust makes room for moral laxity given the 'cowardly calculations' we all make in similar circumstances (Proust 1987, 120; 2002, 125). Françoise has to condemn the animal to death in order to perform her menial tasks as a cook. Such inverted ethical impulse (we will kill an animal more easily if we reduce it to the status of a 'dirty beast') was lacking in Belacqua's aunt, which made her bland gesture even more scandalous. Beckett follows Proust's lead when he meditates on affective ambivalence, on the proximity of ethical contraries, and also on the function of moral allegory. The sickly kitchen maid is said to be the 'spit of a Paduan Virtue' ('Text 3', *CP* 38) because Swann, the aesthete, has noted her physical resemblance with Giotto's portrayal of Charity, depicted as a banal looking woman in the Allegories of Virtues and Vices, visible in the Scrovegni chapel of Padua's Arena. The narrator, who keeps a reproduction of the 'Caritas' figure in his room (given to him by Swann) was first surprised by the way Giotto – a contemporary of Dante – presented his Virtues as earthy, stolid, mannish, almost vulgar women. He could not fathom why this 'Charity without charity' (Proust 2002, 83) or the allegory of Justice could be praised by Swann, a disciple of Ruskin in this matter. The latter allegory appeared as 'a Justice whose grayish and meanly regular face was the very same which, in Combray, characterized certain pretty, pious and unfeeling bourgeois ladies I saw at Mass, some of whom had long since been enrolled in the reserve militia of Injustice' (Proust 2002, 83). The narrator later understands how modern allegories are material fragments of a whole whose symbolic meaning can be grafted on the material body. Thus the swollen belly of the kitchen maid evokes painful pregnancy and other visceral aspects of the body in which death is lurking.

The juxtaposition of the figures of Justice and Injustice is a dominant theme in Beckett's works, whose sense of ethics is predicated on an awareness

of this baffling reversibility. We can see this theme as late as *How It Is*, a dark novel narrating the progression through mud of a narrator who finds Pim, another quester, whom he tortures mercilessly by carving words on his buttocks with a can opener. Yet, in part III, we are told that their sadistic couplings and subsequent uncouplings obey ‘our justice’. A revealing paragraph displays a violent language testifying to metaphysical despair:

the fuck who suffers who makes us to suffer who cries who to be left in peace in the dark the mud gibbers ten seconds fifteen seconds of sun clouds earth sea patches of blue clear nights and of a creature if not still standing still capable of standing always the same the same imagination spent looking for a hole that he may be seen no more in the middle of this faery who drinks that drop of piss of being and who with his last gasp pisses it to drink the moment it’s someone each in his turn as our justice wills and never any end it wills that too dead or none. (*HII* 115)

Jonathan Boulter has interpreted this passage and other references to Justice according to Jacques Derrida’s ‘Force of Law’ as the clash between a Law, which can be deconstructed, and a Justice that cannot be defined or deconstructed (2012, 173–200; see also Cunningham 2008, 21–37). Much as I appreciate Derrida’s essay and the subtlety of Boulter’s ‘post-human’ interpretation, Derrida’s definition of Justice as a quasi-transcendental aporia or the experience of the impossible is not relevant here. Why is **Beckett’s** Justice calculating, adding up numbers, ensuring that the Same be always repeated identically? The paradox embodied by this passage is that one cannot distinguish Justice from Injustice. Justice means here more a ‘Law’ of eternal return, blending Nietzsche’s concept of time and Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s ideology of life as a crawl through mud until death frees us. Both are underpinned by a Dantean vision of excremental Hell (Caselli 2005b, 148–83). In fact, there is no obvious difference between this ‘piss of being’ (*cette goutte de pisse d’être*; **Beckett** 1961, 159) and the statement that ‘we have our being in justice’ (*on est dans la justice*; *HII* 108; **Beckett** 1961, 159). The context is clear: ‘nothing to be done in any case we have our being in justice I have never heard anything to the contrary’ (*HII* 108). The echo of the opening sentence of *Waiting for Godot* signals that ‘Justice’ does not gesture toward an opening to the incalculable but signals a sad necessity, a mortal and moral fate. The ethical experience proposed by **Beckett** with a rare rigor – here, the voice uttering something ‘to the contrary’, the ethical voice, is silent – takes place outside the domain of Justice.

Throughout his work, **Beckett’s** notion of ‘Justice’ remains indebted to Dante’s concept of *contrapasso*, which formalizes a homology between the types of sins committed on earth and the types of punishment meted out in Hell. Thus, to return to ‘Text 3’, it is logical to see Dante’s allegories relay

Proust's allegories. Both authors taken together have taught Beckett how to overcome an initial reflex of compassion by contemplating 'Justice', knowing fully that it is indistinguishable from 'Injustice'. The souls of the damned speak:

We are proud in our pain  
 our life was not blind.  
 Worms breed in the red tears  
 as they slouch unnamed  
 scorned by the black ferry  
 despairing of death  
 who shall not scour in swift joy  
 the bright hill's girdle  
 nor tremble with the dark pride of torture  
 and the bitter dignity of an ingenious damnation. (CP 39)

For the eternally damned, there is nothing to expect from death, which is a source of despair but also of pride. This leaves aside the problem of compassion.

Lo-Ruhama Lo-Ruhama  
 pity is quick with death.  
 Presumptuous passionate fool come now  
 and stand cold  
 on the cold moon. (CP 39)

Lo-Ruhama was the daughter Hosea had with a prostitute, symbolizing Israel in Hosea 1:6, because her name means 'not pitied'. This leads to the line that bothered Belacqua: 'Qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta' (*Inferno*, XX, ln. 280). Here, in Hell, pity is only alive when it is fully dead. How can one translate, that is move on by making sense of this brash oxymoron? In 'Dante and the Lobster', Belacqua chews on this magnificent 'pun', unable to translate it. The teacher's superb response 'Do you think, she murmured, it is absolutely necessary to translate it?' (MPTK 18) is rigorously parallel to the question Belacqua poses facing Dante the character in his *Commedia*: Why translate? Why keep on moving?

This is Belacqua's question in *Purgatorio*. Dante walking with Virgil hears a voice inviting them to rest. Under a boulder, men sit in the shade. One of them, looking exhausted, his arms around his knees, his head bent down, addresses them. Belacqua's fastidious slowness allows Dante to identify him. When he asks what he is doing, Belacqua answers: 'O brother, what's the use of climbing?' (IV, ln. 121-7). His cheeky 'O frate, andar in sù che porta?' triggers Dante's 'wan smile', repeatedly invoked by Beckett (as in *Company* or *The Lost Ones*). In fact, Belacqua's predicament derives from laziness: he

has waited until the last minute before repenting for his sins, and has to wait in the ante-purgatory a number of years equal to the years spent on earth.

When **Beckett** chose other alter egos like Murphy or Molloy, they all passed through a moment of regression, experiencing what Murphy calls ‘the Belacqua bliss’ (*Mu* 71). Like Murphy, then, Belacqua sits in an ante-purgatory, a transitional space between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, a limbo for adults who have never been properly born, like Jung’s little girl who died because of her immersion in her dream world. Belacqua is a disabused ironist and indolent questioner who, because he is ‘stuck’ by divine decree, voices critical, wistful, and antiheroic objections to the grand pattern of the quest on which Dante has embarked. Belacqua’s exhausted ‘What’s the point?’ is a first adumbration of the ethical voice; it problematizes the teleology of Dante’s progression, hence the very notion of ‘progress’ as such.

Dante attempted to create an ‘epic of judgment’, as Ezra Pound wrote, an epic of practical or political ethics. Its immense scope required the creation of a new language, which can be compared to Joyce’s *Work in Progress*. **Beckett**’s view of Purgatory is modeled on Dante and Joyce, even though the latter is founded on the loss of the absolute: ‘In what sense, then, is Mr Joyce’s work purgatorial? In the absolute absence of the absolute’ (‘Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce’, *Dis* 22). **Beckett** shared Joyce’s antiabsolutism, but not his linguistic optimism. For Joyce, as long as the verbal machine purred on, the process would regenerate itself endlessly, which is why *Finnegans Wake* is a circular text, virtually infinite. For **Beckett**, however, one should not bypass the ethical moment of questioning, and this manifests itself above all by an interruption of such progress.

In order to bypass the aporia of a Justice looking too much like Injustice, or of a process of purgation revolving too blissfully on itself, **Beckett** needed a powerful lever. This he found in Arnold Geulincx’s *Ethics*, in which he discovered a surprising combination of absolute determinism (everything that happens, including my body’s movements, happens because God wills it) and of absolute freedom (I can always will a contrarian gesture). *Molloy* condenses this well: ‘I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit’ (*Mo* 50). Of course, the boat is that of Ulysses by reference to Dante’s evocation of the last shipwreck of the hero in *Inferno*, Canto 26, and to Joyce’s novel. Even such marginal freedom can perform miracles.

**Beckett** began to read Geulincx in the 1930s; we find references in the ‘Philosophy notes’ at Trinity College and in the ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook. The post-Cartesian Flemish philosopher offered a model of irreducible freedom similar to what Jean-Paul Sartre was elaborating at the same time. We

have the text of **Beckett's** notes in *Arnold Geulincx's Ethics with Samuel Beckett's Notes* (see Van Ruler and Uhlmann 2006). Geulincx's philosophy underpins the narratological development of *Murphy*, once he has settled in the mental hospital. Murphy has leisure to meditate on Geulincx's motto, '*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*'. *Murphy* presents a 'negative cogito' first adumbrated by the Occasionalist philosopher whose main verb is '*nescio*' ['I do not know']. '*Ubi nihil vales, nihil velis*' means 'Where you are worth nothing, you will want nothing', even though Anthony Uhlmann, Matthew Feldman, and others have rendered it as 'Where you have no power, you will have no desire'. Such hesitation corresponds to the two meanings of *valeo* in Latin. *Valeo*, the verb at the root of the word 'value', means either 'I am strong, powerful, healthy', or 'I prevail'. The imperative 'Vale!' was a 'Goodbye!' or 'Farewell!'. **Beckett** found in Geulincx a philosophy that said 'Goodbye' to all previous ethical systems, by displaying the consciousness of a subject who does not know, and the source of a paradoxical moral health reached through negativity and impotence.

**Beckett** often compared Geulincx's idea of man as a puppet whose very movements are pulled by God with Kleist's meditation on puppets. In both cases, a certain grace or ease comes from the abandonment of one's will. As Thomas Dommange argues, Geulincx is less a philosopher of humility and impotence than a thinker of the permanent miracle: here is a definite mechanization of the ineffable (see Doutey 2012). At least, such a point of view destabilizes certainties, frees us from determinism or the principle of causality. If causality does not regulate the world or our actions, we are free, as Kant and Schopenhauer both observe. The principle of sufficient reason is replaced by a principle of insufficient reason – which leaves room for an unexplained grace. Hence the principle of Unreason is always superior to rational systems of ethics balancing Justice and Injustice.

**Beckett** transformed Descartes's 'cogito ergo sum', by then a 'received idea' mentioned by Flaubert, into its reversal: 'nescio ergo sum'. The maxim '*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*' aims less at restricting will to possible domains of application than at freeing will from having any object. Thus **Beckett** admired the philosophical pluck displayed by Geulincx, who wrote: 'Are my body and soul pure failures and my intelligence still somewhat valid? Then I shall be a tailor' (qtd. in Doutey 2012, 115). As the old joke of God and the tailor shows in *Endgame*, better to have a good tailor than contemplate the disastrous spectacle of Creation.

If Geulincx brought to **Beckett** the concept of a thinking of the outside, of a pure determination by the Other, the insight was not accompanied by a mode of writing generated by the philosophy. He discovered this 'other' writing in Marquis de Sade's works. **Beckett** was to translate de Sade's 120



*Days of Sodom* for Jack Kahane in 1938. Discovering the book, he expressed admiration: ‘The obscenity of surface is indescribable. Nothing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. The composition is extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante’s’ (*LSB I* 607). The notion that de Sade was a Puritan anticipates theses developed in the 1940s by Pierre Klossowski (1991) and Maurice Blanchot (2004). **Beckett** insisted that de Sade was not pornographic, for indeed, if de Sade tried to show everything, including whatever exceeds the ‘stage’, he never attempted to seduce the reader by erotic images. He attempted to convince by a mad reason.

Similarly, **Beckett’s** sadism appears in *Watt* when the narrator and Watt feed their own offspring to rats:

And then we would sit down in the midst of them, and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog, or a baby thrush, or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative. It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God. (*W* 133)

Sadean perversity parodies pastoral Rousseauism. Watt and Sam demonstrate that the fundamental law of Nature is crime. The main object of the transgression is parenthood. Like de Sade, **Beckett** subverts the traditional notion of family as the site of morality. Sam and Watt shift vertiginously from a sham goodness for animals to pure cruelty, then ‘reason’ about their actions, elaborating a parodic antitheology. **Beckett** has understood de Sade’s wish to emulate an absolutely evil God, a ‘supremely-evil-being’ as Lacan wrote in ‘Kant with Sade’ (Lacan 1992; 2006, 652).

For **Beckett** as for de Sade, the foundation of the cruel fantasy is an inverted theology. De Sade’s libertines have such a hatred of religion that in 120 *Days of Sodom* the most severely punished violation is to mention God. This point had not been missed by **Beckett**, who rewrites Pascal’s maxim about man who wants to be an angel or god but ends up being a beast. In *Watt*, man is not even able to kill a rat, since rats are curious theological creatures who happen once in a while to eat a consecrated host. Yet, one should not remain stuck in an anthropological discourse:

For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man, which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time, and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realized that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite. (*W* 64)

Whether God exists or not, in the ethical domain, man is not even a metaphor, he exists only as a catachresis. Watt tries out names on things as

if they were old rags found in an attic. Watt can no more say of a pot that it is a ‘pot’ than of a man that it is a ‘man’. His linguistic dereliction calls up the crisis of language experienced by Lord Chandos in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s famous 1902 ‘Letter’. Sam’s and Watt’s cruel games produce a tension between an unnamable humanity and an antitheology of cruelty. It is thanks to this tension that an ethics that is not anthropomorphic or theological remains possible.

In *Watt*, Knott embodies Kant’s moral law, above all a formalization of what one ‘can’t do’. Here Beckett’s project is comparable to Horkheimer and Adorno’s in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, 63–93), a book coincidentally written at the same time as *Watt* by two exiles from Nazi Germany. Like the refugees from the Frankfurt school, Beckett questions the madness of pure Reason as he explained in an interview: ‘The crisis started with the end of the 17th century, after Galileo. The 18th century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la Raison*. I’ve never understood that; they’re all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!*’ (qtd. by Macmillan and Fehsenfeld 1988, 231). Given the loss of faith in Reason on the one hand, and in God on the other, ethics names a space within language in which language struggles against its very limits, as both Hofmannsthal and Wittgenstein knew. What is ethical is therefore inevitably critical, as Adorno knew. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno show how Kant’s pure Reason has ushered in the calculating madness of a totalitarian order. When the *Critique of Practical Reason* stresses the autonomy and self-determination of the moral subject, so as to define the pure form of ethical action, the philosophy of Enlightenment meets global capitalism with a vengeance. Human concerns have to be ruled out, what matters is merely the conformity of Reason with its own laws. Pure Reason is both abstract and devoid of any object, like the empty compassion of Françoise in Proust’s narrative.

As Adorno states, Juliette is more logical than Kant when she draws the conclusion that the order of society justifies crime: crime is regulated by a rationality that regulates human activities and pleasures. And Sadean ‘apathy’ approximates Kant’s ‘disinterestedness’, both underpinning the brutal efficiency of the bourgeois conquest of the world. The right to enjoyment claimed by de Sade involves the extension of its field up to one’s right to enjoy the bodies of others, and to torture them as one likes. The counterpart of this globalized rationality is the systematic mechanization of perverse pleasures in the Sadean orgy. Barthes noted how the orgy functioned as a perfectly oiled mechanism in which everyone had a part to play, since nobody was to remain idle (1989, 152–3).

*Watt*’s eponymous hero calls up the inventor of the steam engine, James Watt, a contemporary of Immanuel Kant and of the Marquis de Sade. His

name is synonymous with the inception of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. His main invention was based on a simple interaction of pistons, rods, and cylinders transforming energy into work. It is not such a stretch to see this as a sexual mechanism as well: the steam will easily emblemize bodies whose enjoyment is to be produced in a number or repetitive performances. Watt's name condenses the 'whatness' of technology, an 'essence' which, as Heidegger notes in his writings on technology, has by itself nothing technological, and one of the inventors who paved the way to today's technological revolution.

De Sade points out the dark side of humanitarian ethics when he rephrases man's universality in relation to the unconditionality of the Law, even though it is a caricature. Respect and blasphemy both address the same underpinning of fantasy by the Law of desire, which is presented as the obscene *jouissance* of the divine Other. The transgressive principle described by Lacan, Adorno, and Horkheimer implies a different writing. A transgression that questions the limits of humanity and the law presiding over limits postulates the need for a different writing. This explains the deviant logic and the series of permutations deployed systematically in *Watt*. *Watt* is a Kantian novel staging Sadean tortures of thought because rational knowledge is a machine that barely hides relations of domination, fear, and horror. 'Too fearful to assume himself the onus of a decision, said Mr. Hackett, he refers it to the frigid machinery of a time-space relation' (*W* 15). In a language that stages a repetitive foreclosure, pointing to an elsewhere of ethics, de Sade and Beckett denounce the dark side of universalistic ethics. If man is defined by the unconditionality of his rapport to the Law, then it is a welcome breath of fresh air to let subversion remind us of the reverse of the subject, its determination from behind. The irony is that de Sade's libertines devote their lives to approximating a divine *jouissance* through excess and inflicted pain, and they become slaves to this extreme enjoyment when they believe that they are the masters of the universe. Beckett's solution is different: he postulates an irrational imperative that just states the need to keep on saying, living, and creating.

Beckett's ethical position is shared by Lacan when the latter refuses to take the 'soul' as the seat of negative or positive affects, insisting that one should just pay attention to one's duty of 'saying well' – that is of expressing oneself as best as one can – even facing the most trivial incidents of one's life; as he stated 'sadness' should not be construed as 'a state of the soul', since 'it is simply a moral failing, as Dante, and even Spinoza, said: a sin, which means a moral weakness, which is, ultimately located only in relation to thought, that is, in the duty to speak well, to find one's way in dealing with the unconscious, with the structure.'<sup>1</sup> A Kantian imperative to

‘go on’, but in style, and this despite all the odds, remains Beckett’s enduring ethical testament. In *Watt*, Arsene lists several types of laughter: the bitter laugh laughing at what is not good, the ethical laugh; the laugh laughing at what is not true, the intellectual laugh; and above all, the pure laugh, called ‘dianoetic laugh’, the laugh laughing at itself (W 40).

After *Watt*, it seems that dianoetic laughter and virtues tend to replace practical virtues in Beckett’s works. What count most are virtues like courage, perseverance, wisdom, virtues that seek the truth, placed above practical virtues like honesty, loyalty, goodness, and temperance or compassion, to follow Aristotle’s division. This is what Alain Badiou at any rate deduces from Beckett’s entire work: an admonition that we should keep the courage to live on, and even find beauty in art and love.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Badiou, Beckett’s ethics is truly a meta-ethics. A metaphysical laughter à la Bataille has replaced the earlier exhaustion marked by the pain of having been born, while discovering a concept of the Other.

This analysis can be deduced from *Worstward Ho*, as Badiou has shown (2005, 89–121), but can also have been brought to Beckett by Proust, to whom we need to return. One has often noted the proximity of Beckett’s reading of Proust with that of Levinas (see Critchley 2004; Weller 2006; and Fifield 2013) who is often opposed to Badiou, although I would like to connect them. Levinas wrote extensively on Proust during World War II, and then condensed his views in 1947 in his paper ‘The Other in Proust’ (1989, 160–5). Unlike Sartre, Levinas refused to reduce Proust to psychology; for him, sociology and eroticism were better themes to pursue. Levinas saw *La Recherche* as a philosophical novel whose narrative is constantly cut by digressions offering theories about art, jealousy, homosexuality, music, travels, memory, perception, and so forth. However, those theories do not present theses about ethics, hence one should not read Proust ethically. Proust’s investigations explore the spiraling abyss of human perversion. Once Sodom and Gomorrah have been crossed, no ethical system remains intact. For Levinas, no moral value survives unscathed:

It is curious to note the extent to which Proust’s amorality fills his world with the wildest freedom, and confers on definite objects and beings a scintillating sense of possibility undulled by definition. One would have thought that moral laws rid the world of such glittering extravaganzas more rigorously than natural laws and that magic begins, like a witches’ Sabbath, where ethics leave off. The change and development in characters, some of them highly unlikely, feel completely natural in a world that has reverted to Sodom and Gomorrah, and relations are established between terms that seemed not to permit them. Everything is giddily possible. (1989, 162)

Proust would rephrase Dostoyevsky's 'God is dead, everything is possible!'. Levinas argues that Proust's amorality goes beyond the antimorality of de Sade and Nietzsche. The key lies in the lesson brought home to the narrator by Albertine, in the ethical revelation of existence as otherness.

Thus one witnesses a striking convergence between Levinas's and Beckett's readings of an amoral Proust. Writing the first English monograph on Proust in 1931, Beckett highlighted the absence of moral sense in Proust's world: 'Here, as always, Proust is completely detached from all moral considerations. There is no right and wrong in Proust nor in his world' (*PTD* 66). Like Levinas, Beckett offsets this lack of moral concerns by the emergence of a radical otherness embodied by Albertine. The evocation of a plural 'Albertines' establishes a 'pictorial multiplicity of Albertine that will duly evolve into a *plastic* and moral multiplicity' (47; emphasis in the original). Contradictions in her being are not 'an effect of the observer's angle of approach' but 'a multiplicity in depth, a turmoil of objective and immanent contradictions over which the subject has no control' (47). What the narrator loves in the fickle and lying Albertine is not a disappointing body or a mind that often bores him, but the potential of an infinite otherness it holds. For Levinas, similarly, Proust's fiction acquires exemplary philosophical value in that it achieves a radical break with classical ontology. Proust 'breaks definitively with Parmenides' (Levinas 1989, 165) because he opens the field of an ethics of desire and otherness beyond morality. This new ethics finds an adequate expression in literature, which applies to the whole of Beckett's work.

#### NOTES

- 1 Lacan 1990, 22, translation modified. The original has '*devoir de bien dire*' (in Lacan 1974, 39) translated as 'the duty to be well-spoken', which tones down the 'imperative of saying' so crucial for Beckett.
- 2 I have developed a comparison between Badiou's and Adorno's readings of Beckett, arguing that they assert similar theses in opposite vocabularies: 'Philosophizing with Beckett: Adorno and Badiou' (Rabaté 2010). See also Weller 2010a.