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## The Ethics of Alterity in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ethical reverberations of inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*. The philosophical tradition constituting the frame of reference of this paper will include the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose influential reconceptualization of ethics as the first philosophy allows a new reading of *How It Is*, a reading which focuses on the role of alterity and inexpressibility. With Levinas's work being so intimately connected with the philosophical framework developed by Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, both of whom viewed Beckett's work as expressing their respective philosophical tenets, it is surprising that more attention has not been paid to the ethical aspect of Beckett's work. This paper will attempt to address this question with respect to Beckett's *How It Is*, which, as will be developed, establishes the relation to alterity as its primary theme.

This paper will develop the contention that *How It Is* is an attempt to address alterity without incorporating it into its own idiom, i.e. preserving its otherness by means of not only paratactic syntax, which frustrates cohesion and comprehension, but also through the theme of witness and testimony which I draw from Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The role of the witness and testimony will be selected as a focal point of the analysis because of its relation to the Holocaust experience referred to by Agamben and Levinas. Speaking of the Holocaust has become a modern resuscitation of the apophatic tradition which confers upon the witness silence in much the same way in which the true protagonist of *How It Is* is a silent witness, on behalf of whom the narrator conveys the story.

### 1. Exteriority and alterity in Levinas

It would not be an overstatement to claim that Emmanuel Levinas is most credited with bringing the notion of alterity and ethics to bear on contemporary philosophy.

It is after all Levinas who inspired such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot who helped to instantiate what is now commonly referred to as the “ethical turn” in philosophy. Levinas goes against the tradition which has always reduced alterity into the order of what he, following Plato, calls the Same (*le même; te auton*) by approaching it in a dialectic manner, thus always treating the other as the other of the Same instead of the absolutely other. This infinite distance between the Same and the Other is the foundation of his ethics. In his 1961 *Totality and Infinity*, ethics is described as “the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other” (Levinas 1987: 43). Because the subject has a habitual tendency to “devour” all that is other, totalizing it and stripping it of its alterity, it only achieves a violent manifestation of power over the Other. The notion of grasping (comprehending) is thus regarded in term of an imperialistic power relation towards alterity, because “if you could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power” (Levinas 1987: 90). Ontology and epistemology have assimilated alterity through this comprehension and understanding, thereby eliminating this essential difference. Being forced to respond to the face of the absolutely other interrupts this tendency and is the basis of ethics.

The ethical for Levinas has, therefore, as its base the thought of the Other, or rather as a saving of the Other from expression which would entail its destruction. In other words, if the Other is to be viewed as the absolutely Other, it must be infinitely separated from a language which seeks to identify it always in relation to itself by conferring an identity to it (naming) or by defining it and thus drawing a limit, thereby excising it from the unknown.

To further understand Levinas’s notion of ethics, some terms have to be first defined, though I use the word “define” tentatively, as these terms resist clear definitions. For example, the enigmatic notion of *il y a*, similarly to Derrida’s *différance* and *trace*, and Blanchot’s *neuter*, refers to a preontological state which must necessarily remain beyond the grasp of language. To imagine the *il y a* Levinas asks us to conduct a thought experiment:

Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that “there is”. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plentitude of the void or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and being, the impersonal “field of forces” of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive. The fact of existing imposes itself where there is no longer anything. And it is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself ... There is, as the irremissibility of pure existing. (1987: 46–47)

This exhausted and anonymous residue of what remains after negation has run its course is the *il y a*, which cannot be approached in any way but by means of a language of paradox in keeping with its “fundamental absurdity” (Levinas 1987: 51). It would seem, therefore, that the Other and the *il y a* are one and the same

thing, as both notions exist outside the bounds of rational discourse and resist incorporation into an identity-based idiom.

There is, however, a vital distinction that has to be made between the Other and *il y a*. This distinction is based on the irremissibility of the *il y a*, its irrevocability, and irreducibility, as it is always possible to kill the Other by way of appropriation, while the *il y a* will always remain outside the reach of language. The *il y a* is what remains beyond the dialectic of being and nothingness, it is “the absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plentitude of the voice, or the murmur of silence” (Levinas 1987: 46). The Other, on the other hand, can and has been violently incorporated into the order of the Same, and it is thus in relation to the Other that one can speak of proper ethics. There can be no relation with the *il y a*; it is, indeed, the urgent necessity to escape the vacuous horror of the *il y a* that brings one into an ethical relation with the Other, which ultimately takes the form of responsibility for the Other. Therefore, we see that the escape from the *il y a*, which is neither being nor nothingness, demands a questioning, not of the ontological status of Being, as was the case with Heidegger, but of the ethical relation between one and the absolute other. If alterity is reducible to anything, it is nothing more than this relation, which for Levinas can be mediated only through language and, more specifically, conversation. “We shall try to show that the relation between the same and the other — upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions — is language ... The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation...” (Levinas 1987: 39).

## 2. Ethics and witness in *How It Is*

During the period following the publication of the trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett's focus shifted away from prose work towards theatre, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* being the most famous pieces of this period. Upon his return to Ussy-sur-Marne in 1959, Beckett returned to prose composition and embarked upon a tediously laborious project that was to become *How It Is*. It could be stated that *How It Is*, published in French as *Comment c'est* in 1961 and translated by the author in 1964, is partly a continuation of the familiar disintegrated prose, decomposed and fragmented further to rid itself of a speaking subject. Not as well known as the trilogy or his earlier work (*Murphy*, for instance), *How It Is* is nonetheless regarded by some critics as “the greatest of Beckett's prose works” (Badiou 2003: 63) and a “turning point in Beckett's art (Abbott 1994: 111) and yet many critics have either given it a cursory glance or have completely ignored it. Those, however, who have attempted an analysis of *How It Is* have almost exclusively limited themselves to the familiar themes of self-expression and the search for identity, existentialist meanderings in search of an authentic self,

and the impasse of language expressing the subject (cf. Abbott). Seeing language as the most unusual and innovative aspect of Beckett's prose, certain critics, notably Brienza, have tended to base their interpretation primarily on the linguistic aspect of the prose. Those who chose a more philosophical approach did so primarily within the familiar context mentioned earlier.

What all the aforementioned interpretations fail to address or recognize is the role of alterity in *How It Is* and how the confrontation with an alterior exteriority not only structures the text on a linguistic level, but also supports it thematically. This ethical dimension in *How It Is* becomes the backdrop for critics such as Alain Badiou, Ewa Ziarek Płonowska, and Russell Smith, who see the relation with alterity along with its appropriation by the narrative voice, as the basis for *How It Is*. As Ziarek Płonowska comments, *How It Is*

stages almost obsessively a violent clash between the signification of alterity and the rationality inherent in communication, between the shock of otherness and absorption of this shock within a discursive community, has been read almost exclusively within the paradigms of self-expression or self-referential language. (1996: 171)

Alain Badiou considers *How It Is* "as the mark of a major transformation in the way that Beckett fictionalizes his thinking" (Badiou, 15–16). Badiou notes that *How It Is* is grounded in the category of alterity, "of the encounter and the figure of the Other, which fissures and displaces the solipsistic internment of the *cogito*" (16). Therefore, it is the constant negotiation with the external otherness that becomes the guiding thread in *How It Is*, which constitutes a clear break from the aporetic dissolution and obsessive questioning of the solipsistic subjective "I" one finds in the trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*. What *How It Is* seems to address for the first time is the confrontation with an alterity a self-contained *cogito* excludes in the process of self-formation.

The problems of analysing *How It Is* become obvious from the first pages. Even more so than *Texts for Nothing*, *How It Is* is devoid of any stylistic and grammatical syntax, there is no punctuation, verbs are sometimes omitted, pronouns are left suspended without referents: the whole work is consequently replete with seemingly incoherent and illogical statements, most of which reappear recontextualized throughout the text. To categorize *How It Is* into any literary genre becomes a daunting task, as it completely distances itself from fictive narrative, moving further towards poetry while preserving a semblance of prose.

The text is quite neatly divided into three parts: "before Pim, with Pim, and after Pim." These three parts present the journey of an anonymous being as he crawls through a mud-laden environment with only a sack with food tied around his neck. Only his words constitute the story. His progression towards Pim is depicted in part I. Part II depicts the relation between the anonymous character and Pim in what Ziarek Płonowska calls "a gruesome master/slave dialectic" (172). The subject in this encounter is represented in the "tormentor's position." Part III depicts the subject being abandoned by Pim and left immobile in the dark. Structurally, the three parts are

composed of versets or strophes, each constituting a beginning and an end in itself as well as contributing to the whole of the text. This structure is a departure from the long meandering sentences found in the trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*. These fragments create the impression that the text is constantly starting anew, trying again with each new verset. This impression would be in line with the French title, which exploits the homonym “comment c’est” (how it is) and “commencer” (to begin). Much like the protagonist himself, the language of *How It Is* cannot seem to get itself off the ground and its staccato tempo imitates the drudgery and sheer exhaustion of crawling in the mud with a heavy sack tied to one’s neck.

Ewa Ziarek Płonowska construes the main theme of *How It Is* as the relation between the I and the Other, which, according to her, “provides the narrative with the minimum of content and structure while at the same time undercutting all remnants of structural stability” (172). She proceeds to attribute the paratactic style of *How It Is* to the attempt to include what representation excludes; namely, the enigmatic and always anonymous Other. Much of her analysis depends on the assertion that the fragmentary nature of *How It Is* appeals to the alterity which cannot be admitted within the structural coherence of discourse. Concentrating mainly on the structural and linguistic aspect of the text, she asserts that “the rhetorical effects of parataxis expose a *signification of alterity* incommensurate with the coherence of discourse” (Ziarek Płonowska, 173; emphasis added). Parataxis, as a trope of disconnection and disruption, by undermining the aesthetic unity of the text, opens itself up toward the Other. Ziarek Płonowska locates this relation with the Other not only in the dissolution of the syntax comprising the text, but also in the persistent destabilization of any possible synthesis. The main claim in her argumentation is that “the rhetorical effects of parataxis allow for the inscription of alterity in language and simultaneously prevent its assimilation into the present possibilities of signification” (Ziarek Płonowska, 174). This conclusion would be a very neat solution to the tension between expressibility and inexpressibility, between saying and not being able to speak which has been the foundational tension in Beckett’s poetics of failure, if not for the fact that a solution, any solution, would be detrimental to the poetics itself. It is however possible to take this analysis further and discern in *How It Is* not only a linguistic and structural indication of this relation to alterity, but a thematic one as well.

As was mentioned earlier, Levinas conceived the authentic relationship with the Other in terms of a discursive relationship that takes the form of speech. In a conversation with Philip Nemo in 1981, Levinas says, “I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship” (Levinas 1985: 87–88). It is no longer vision that serves as the metaphor for the relation with the other, as vision is complicit in the act of incorporating the Other. Instead, conversation becomes a metaphor for this relation. What is important to bear in mind is Levinas’s distinction between the Said (the content of discourse) and the Saying, which is a response, a greeting to the Other. As Critchley states

(admittedly crudely) in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, this distinction can also be drawn along the lines of the ethical and the ontological, where the Said would be ontological and the Saying ethical language (2002: 17). Further Critchley adds, that the Saying is “a non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other” (18). The problem that inevitably arises from this distinction is the paradox of expressing that which by definition must remain inexpressible. Since the Saying is a “non-thematizable residue” that must remain beyond comprehension, how can it survive within the confines of philosophical exposition (the Said), which deals in ontological categories? In other words, how is it possible to “perform” the saying without betraying it?

This saying is a response that, in *Otherwise than Being*, is construed as bearing witness to the Other: “No theme, no present, has a capacity for the Infinite. The subject in which the other is in the same, inasmuch as the same is for the other, bears witness to it” (Levinas 1998: 146). Similarly, the ethicality of Beckett’s works does not lie in their thematizing or addressing the Other in any way, but in bearing witness to the Other. The protagonist of *How It Is* constantly repeats that he is only relaying what he has already heard. This places him at a distance from the alterior speaking subject, the one who is “really” telling the story, a story which in the text effectually becomes a quote and testimony.

To further extrapolate the role of the witness and the significance of testimony, I would like to draw upon Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, which focuses on the figure of the witness in the concentration camp. One of the preliminary claims Agamben makes is that in Auschwitz there were two types of prisoners: the typical prisoners who every day struggled to survive and the *Muselmann*. The first type of prisoner is motivated to survive in order to later become the witness of the unfolding tragedy. The prospect of retelling their story gave these people the will to live. Alongside these people, there are the *Muselmann*, the walking dead, who due to the trauma of experiencing the horrors of the concentration camp and the effects of malnutrition and destitution, were bereft of speech and thus could not ever hope to give their testimony. The suffering they endured has brought them to “the extreme threshold between life and death” (Agamben 2002: 47) and they can no longer speak of their experiences. There is, however, a lacuna which Agamben argues calls into question the meaning of testimony and consequently the reliability of the witness. Because to be a witness and give testimony means having survived. Primo Levi, therefore, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, advances the claim that indeed it is the *Muselmann* who is the true witness of the camp, though he is stripped of the ability to speak, write, and simply respond. The *Muselmann*, who experienced dying and death, “those who saw Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance” (Agamben, 33). Agamben sees here the central



paradox in Levi's claim and asks: "how can the true witness be the one who by definition cannot bear witness?" (Agamben, 82). This paradox can also be found in *How It Is*.

Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking ... enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the "imagined substance" and the "I" and, along with it, the true witness. (Agamben, 120)

This "zone of indistinction" is precisely what is being created by the paratactic nature of Beckett's prose in *How It Is*. The speechless *Muselmann* needs a speaking subject to give testimony in his stead, thereby deferring the origin of the testimony. The impossibility of positing the origin of enunciation and of distinguishing what is being quoted from what is being *said confers authority to the testimony*. Furthermore, this zone of indistinction renders possible the opening towards alterity without the attendant risk of synthesizing and incorporating it.

As the protagonist of *How It Is* utters, "a witness I'd need a witness" (Beckett 1964: 23). The whole text is structured as a testimony given in place of an unknown subject. "I say it as I hear it" is a sentence repeated in all three chapters and presents the text as a quote of a silent witness. The story starts with "how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it" (7). What deserves attention here is that this is a quote of a quote because the phrase "I say it as I hear it" can also be found in Text 5 of *Texts for Nothing*, "the things one has to listen to, I say it as I hear it" (97) or "my life last state last version *ill-seen ill-heard* ill-recaptured ill-murmured..." (7; emphasis added). Thus, as Smith rightly asserts, the role of the witness is a recurrent almost integral theme in Beckett's work and tends to take on two distinct forms: that of the listener and noter (writer), the writer merely transcribing what he hears. In previous works, such as the trilogy, characters (Molloy, Moran and Malone) are often presented as having to fulfill an obligation to write of their experiences, even the unnamable, who at one point asks, "is it I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee" (Beckett 1973: 233), is presented in terms of his ability to write. Further, Text 5 of *Text for Nothing* deals almost exclusively with this listening/noting dichotomy. Writing thus is inextricably linked in Beckett's work with being in terms of both composition and decomposition, creation and doubling.

In *How It Is* witnesses are evoked only to be replaced by others in much the same way as the vice-existers in *The Unnamable* appear only to later make room for a new name. The narrator invents witnesses, as he is "all alone and the witness bending over me name Kram bending over us father to son to grandson yes or no and the scribe name Krim generations of scribes keeping the record a little aloof sitting standing it's not said yes or no samples extracts" (Beckett 1964: 80). Later, Krim and Kram, coalesce into Kram, "Kram alone is enough Kram alone witness and scribe"(67). The narrator has to invent these witnesses in order to constitute

his own existence. In much the same way witnesses were necessary to authenticate the sacrifice of Christ on the cross — sacrificial torture referenced in *How It Is* — so a witness is also necessary for the act of creation, as God “saw” that what He had created was good. Similarly in *How It Is* a divine being, who “listens to himself and who when he lends his ear to our murmur does no more than lend it to a story of his own devising” (Beckett 1964: 139) presides over the narrative.

Though it becomes clear that the encounter between the narrator and Pim is established within the master–slave or God–creation dichotomy, none of the positions is fixed and stable. Pim is once the tormentor and once the slave. The tormentor becomes the tormented and the all-powerful God becomes the sacrificial lamb, which is why the biblical references juxtapose the creation myth of the Old Testament with the sacrifice of the New Testament. The all-powerful writer of stories with those who are incorporated to those stories and are left incapable to bear witness to their plight.

By the end of the narrative even these witnesses are disposed: “all this business ... of an ear listening to me yes a care for me yes an ability to note yes all that all balls yes Krim and Kram yes all balls yes” (Beckett 1964: 145). As Russell Smith argues, the analysis of *How It Is* hinges on the validity of this one declaration. Smith places particular focus on the final words of the text, where the narrator claims that everything written thus far, including the characters of Pim and Bom, Krim and Kram, the numerous encounters and solitude have been “all balls from the start to finish” and that there has been “only one voice here mine yes”, not the constant quoting and “saying it as I hear it.” According to Smith, “this interpretive decision is ultimately about whether the text portrays a self-referential invention or a testimony to the presence of alterity” (2006: 356). If the whole text thus far has been predicated upon the insistent claim that the narrator is merely recounting what he hears, then the idea of authority and source of origin of the speaking voice are issues which have to remain suspended. This final negation would in fact reinstate a source and central character who devised the whole story. This is a decision which remains suspended and no finality is evoked. On the one hand, there is no reason to privilege the final negation as having more weight than all the previous negations in the text. There is no evidence that would allow us to endow this negation with more value. Be that as it may, this final negation does succeed in suspending the text, for no conclusion can be drawn as to its validity. It would seem that no other conclusion could be more fitting for a text which addresses alterity.

### 3. Conclusion

As has been discussed in this paper, the relation of the “I” and the Other is one of the central questions in *How It Is*; it is this question that provides the text with an underlying matrix sustaining its structure. This obligation to respond to the



Other issued by the exteriority of the text puts the subject in an ethical relation not only to alterity, but what is most important, to itself, as it is through this process that the self is brought into question. Indeed, the destabilization of the self has been one of the main features of Beckett's fiction, noticeably pronounced in the trilogy, and can also be observed in *How It Is*. Because *How It Is* is constructed by means of paratactic syntax, proposition advanced only to be later negated, paradox and inconsistency, then we see that the idea of authority and source of origin of the speaking voice are issues which have to remain suspended. On this level, however, *How It Is* does not differ greatly from the trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*. The way in which *How It Is* advances this aesthetics of inexpressibility further is by placing the relation to alterity as the focus of the text, instead of the solipsistic self-questioning which governed the trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*. By bringing the Other to bear upon the self, Beckett instantiates what Levinas construed as the infinite conversation with alterity. Instead of reading this disintegration of language as a way to apophatically approach a presence beyond the propositional materiality of language, *How It Is* asks us to reposition a relation to alterity in such a way that would preserve it from the institutionalizing force of linguistic dominion.

*How It Is* presents an encounter with alterity in a way that would be consistent with a Levinasian Saying. The effects of paratactic prose, which suspends the position of both the narrator and the confrontation with Pim, render possible an ethical questioning of the subject as the source of the narrative. In *How It Is*, Beckett succeeded in eliminating the speaking I, a project that obsessively haunted *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*. With the multilayered intertextual quoting and self-referencing, the text refuses the invocation of presence, but instead invokes the non-thematizable remainder of the Said. In other words, Beckett is no longer operating within the ontological domain by attempting to establish a source of presence through *via negativa*, but has entered the ethical domain of the Levinasian Saying which has no end, no beginning and, most importantly, no content. The Saying circulates in the text as the indeterminate and silent witness which, much like the *Muselman*, makes its voice manifest by proxy, placing the subject in a Dantesque purgatory, or what amounts to an indefinite rendition of the *il y a*, with the protagonist merely quoting or speaking on behalf of the real witness.

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