

BOOK REVIEW

COURAGE AND LOVE IN BADIOU'S *BECKETT*

G. Storey

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Alain Badiou's writings on Beckett represent a surprising turn for his philosophy towards dealing with questions which he appears to ignore in the rest of his philosophical *oeuvre*. Here we see him taking up the issues of philosophical anthropology with its concern to designate the being of the human, and also to address the question of the nature of the being of that subjectivity that precedes the Subject that is called forth by the Event. What this means, of course, is that Badiou's treatment of Beckett bears comparison with the dominant tradition of interpretation of Beckett, namely existentialism. Badiou tends to dismiss existentialism as a species of nihilistic humanism, paralysed by its own vision of metaphysical absurdity, and generally wants to clearly distance his Beckett from what he takes to be the ideology of existentialism.

Badiou's reading of Beckett is structured around one very interesting and innovative hypothesis, which is that while Beckett's work *The Trilogy*, and its aftermath, *Texts for Nothing*, suggests that Beckett has been brought to an impasse, the works which come after, notably for Badiou *How It Is* and *The Lost Ones*, reveal a movement beyond this impasse. This movement beyond impasse in Beckett is analogous to Badiou's notion of the unprecedented arrival of the Event because there is nothing that could account for it within the ontological situation of Beckett's moribund avatars of the Self. But what is perhaps most interesting from the point of view of Badiou's philosophy is that the example of Beckett's later fiction leads to a specific formulation of the Event in terms of the chance encounter with the Other. It is the Other who comes to relieve the Self of the solipsistic hell of interminable monologue. A notable difference here from Sartre for whom 'Hell is others'. For Badiou's reading of Beckett, we could perhaps say that 'Hell is all alone', but the retroactive light of truth, that is cast by the event of encounter with

the Other, is that existence is such that something can happen precisely in that situation where all hope of such a possibility appears exhausted. Thus the gift to being that comes from this unprecedented upsurge of alterity in the midst of the ontological aridity of the Same is the insight into being's contingency.

Starting with the extreme point Beckett arrives at with *The Unnamable* we confront a 'fictional set-up', as Badiou puts it, in which a cogito is engaged in a desperate ordeal. This witness to the apparent aftermath of a catastrophe, or so 'it' tells itself, seems to have fallen into a pit of nothingness. This myth of its own fall is a key gambit in the attempt to establish the foundation for its proper place in being. *The Unnamable's* problem arises from being limited to *existing its place* which, paradoxically, leads to the annihilation of any relation to a place. There is no sense of an elsewhere, not even a dim comprehension of an object in relation to which its place could be defined. This radically dispossessed cogito can only exist in the realm of its own inward determinations provoked by inapprehensible and unthinkable objects which surround it, without the possibility of the cogito being able to know them. While the tedium of this cogito's 'thinking of thinking' gives the impression of being extinct, it is in fact a continuity in nothingness. Badiou correctly apprehends, from the perspective of his own philosophical intervention, that what at first appears as revelling in nihilism marked by impotence, ignorance and ambiguity is in fact an effort to endure the traversing of the void in order to wrest from this ordeal a penetrating glimpse into such fundamental questions as: how does a truth of being enter the fiction of its place? And: by means of which processes can a subject hope to identify itself? It is not literature's role to provide the answers to such questions but rather to stage the situation of the emergence of their insistence and, as in the case of Beckett, by way of the figure of an ongoing failure, to reveal the impossible obligation of fidelity to the question.

This fidelity to the questions, that are awakened by insight into the contingency of being, mark the singularity of Beckett's artistic project. It is not the same fidelity as the fidelity to the truth that induces the Badiouian subject in the aftermath of an event. The Beckettian version of fidelity is a response to being that is marked by the openness to the possibility of an event prior to the actualization of any event. It is what Badiou names courage. For here there is something inexplicable arising from the situation of being, oscillating as it does between a blank staring at the grey-black of being and the interminable reiteration of prevailing meaning within the confines of solipsistic thought, there is the singularity of a being for whom an event is possible. It is this very being for whom an event is a possibility that Badiou names courage. It is important to elaborate here on just what has emerged out of Badiou's engagement with Beckett. Courage names something that precedes any event and is therefore part of the ontological situation of being. Courage is a mark of ontological distinction rather than psychological disposition—it names the human mode of being that *exists* in relation to the situation of being and *exists* in such a way that the possibility of an event *haunts* the situation of being. Badiou's naming of courage then posits an ontologically differentiated mode of being that recalls the Sartrean being-for-itself as the being of ontological difference arising out of the heart of

Being-in-itself. By way of the upsurge of the for-itself, the Sartrean 'event', Being-in-itself can be said to appear in situation and be *haunted* by the possibility of events. Badiou's identification with Sartre is often mentioned by Badiou's commentators but always with a rapidity that betrays the embarrassment of current orthodoxy. It seems to us that the Beckett text suggests the need for certain points to be clarified at the ontological level of Badiou's discourse for the connection to Sartre to be fully illuminated. Clearly the anti-humanist rhetoric that satisfies itself with the contemptuous dismissal of a perceived variant of humanist ideology in the figure of Sartrean existentialism is a distraction that must be put aside by serious thought that needs to engage with the philosophical issues raised at the ontological level by Badiou's engagement with Beckett.

A further point of interest for Badiou's philosophical enterprise arising out of his engagement with Beckett is the relationship between event, truth and the encounter with the Other. Surprisingly, it seems that of the four Badiouian truth processes the one that corresponds the most to Beckett's enterprise, particularly as it is deemed by Badiou to have opened out in Beckett's later phase, is that of Love. Love as truth procedure is marked by the event of encounter with the Other. Such encounter is the focus of Beckett's hypothetical experiments in *How It Is* and *The Lost Ones* but there is to be found numerous traces of encounter, albeit failed, and meditations on love throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*. What is singular about Love as a truth procedure is that it marks the possibility of shared truth—a possibility that can be said to supervene all other truth processes—for if truths exist it will be necessary, as Badiou says, 'to expose these truths to the test of the Other' (59). On the possibility of the sharing of singular truths our human happiness depends.

To hear Badiou speak so frankly of courage and love with respect to the fundamental ethical orientation of Beckett's project is remarkable. No doubt Samuel Beckett would have smiled to hear it too.

Graham Storey
Independent Scholar