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Beyond the Suffering of Being: Desire in Giacomo Leopardi and Samuel Beckett

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BEYOND THE SUFFERING OF BEING:
DESIRE IN GIACOMO LEOPARDI AND SAMUEL BECKETT

(Thesis format: monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I question critical approaches that argue for Giacomo Leopardi's and Samuel Beckett's pessimism and nihilism. Beckett quotes Leopardi when discussing the removal of desire in his monograph *Proust*, a context that has spurred pessimist and nihilist readings, whether the focus has been on one writer, the other, or both. I argue that the inappropriateness of the pessimist and nihilist label is, on the contrary, specifically exposed through the role of desire in the two thinkers. After tracing the notion of desire as it developed from Leopardi to key twentieth-century thinkers, I illustrate how, in contrast to the Greek concept of *ataraxia* as a form of ablation of desire, the desire of and for the Other is central in the two authors' oeuvres. That is, while the two writers' attempt to reach the respective existential cores of Beckettian "suffering of being" and Leopardian "*souffrance*" might seem to point towards the celebrated nothingness of their existential quest, closer examination reveals that the attempt to still desire common to both authors is frustrated and outdone by a combative desire that pervades their later work. Hence, while the desire to cease desiring is at the philosophical kernel of both authors' oeuvre, it also draws attention to and exacerbates the inextinguishable quality of desire. Looking at Leopardi's later poetry in the *ciclo d'Aspasia*, including the last poem "La Ginestra, o il fiore del deserto," and examining Beckett's plays *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Not I*, I argue that desire in Leopardi and Beckett could be read as lying at the cusp between Jacques Lacan's and Emmanuel Levinas' theories, a desire that both splits the subject (and is thus based on lack) as much as it moulds the subject when called to address the Other (inspiring what Levinas terms 'infinity' as opposed to 'totality,' an infinity pitted against the nothingness crucial to pessimist and nihilist readings). The centrality of desire in Leopardi and Beckett also comes close to the Lacanian desire-as-paradox, a desire that is lodged at the heart of Leopardi's and Beckett's dianoetic laugh and held to be expressive of their particularly dark, but elevating, humour.

Keywords

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett repeatedly quotes Giacomo Leopardi's poem "A se stesso" in his monograph *Proust* where the notion of desire is central. Lines 4-5 are quoted by Beckett and they reappear in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and in *Molloy* (see 1.1): "In noi di cari inganni | non che la speme, il desiderio è spento" ("Not only our hope | but our desire for dear illusions is gone"; *Proust* 18; my translation). In *Proust*, just before quoting this poem, Beckett catalogues Leopardi as one of the sages who proposed the only impossible solution– the removal of desire–to living. The question of the "ablation of desire" (*Proust* 18), which Beckett here chooses to reflect upon, is the same one that riddled Leopardi, and later Arthur Schopenhauer (whose philosophy considerably bridges Leopardian and Beckettian thought) when they reflected upon the individual's insistence on keeping the false glitter of desiring intact.

The centrality of the "ablation of desire" for Leopardi and Beckett (oftentimes read via Schopenhauer), where the desired experience itself is already conceived as the homeland of delusion, has spurred pessimist and nihilist readings. I argue that the inappropriateness of the pessimist and nihilist labels attributed to Leopardi and Beckett is, on the contrary, specifically exposed through the role of desire in the two thinkers. While the sage who aspires to the removal of desire is central in both writers, the sage ideal Beckett is proposing through Leopardi–particularly in the monograph of time-honoured Schopenhauerian ascent– is a failed sage, a notion that Beckett's later work (but even more so Leopardi's later oeuvre) repeatedly emphasizes.

The Leopardian and Beckettian sage ideal is also ultimately not upheld with respect to aestheticism (see 2.3.1; 2.3.2). Schopenhauer proposes that to be snatched away from desire can transport the individual into the state of pure cognition, where aesthetic appreciation is possible: "the one eye of the world that gazes out from all cognizing creatures" (*World as Will and Representation* 1: 221). This is foreshadowed by Leopardi's ultra-sensitive individual at the mercy of "*souffrance*," who aspires for *atarassia* (ataraxia), and whose quiet suffering enables artistic production. It also clearly prefigures and intersects productively with the Beckettian "suffering of being" (*Proust* 19), which is an attempt at the interruption of longing, and both a source of dolour as much as an apt condition for aesthetic

appreciation. The human being is, nonetheless, always only close to a desireless and will-less realm (see 2.3.2). As Schopenhauer asks, "who has enough strength to survive there [in a state of will-lessness] for long?" (1: 222). Aestheticism requires the elevation of consciousness to the will-less, timeless subject of cognition but when the difficult state of pure contemplation is impossible to achieve, what remains is "the emptiness of the idle will, the misery of boredom" (1: 228).[1]

In contrast to ataraxia as a form of dissolution of desire, the desire of and for the other is central in the two authors' oeuvres. That is, while the two writers' attempt to reach the respective existential cores (Beckettian "suffering of being" [*Proust* 19] and Leopardian "*souffrance*") might seem to point towards the celebrated nothingness of their existential quest, closer examination reveals that the attempt to still desire common to both authors is frustrated and outdone by a combative desire that pervades their (relatively) later work. Hence, while the desire to cease desiring is at the philosophical kernel of both authors' oeuvre, it also draws attention to and exacerbates the inextinguishable quality of desire.

Looking at Leopardi's post-1828 poetry, particularly the poems in the *ciclo d'Aspasia*, as well as the last poem "La Ginestra o il fiore del deserto," and examining Beckett's plays *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, I argue that desire in Leopardi and Beckett could be read as lying at the cusp between Jacques Lacan's and Emmanuel Levinas' theories. It is a desire that encompasses the struggle between the forces of *Thanatos* and *Eros*–desire as self-preservation as opposed to desire in social interaction. These forces are also central to the death–as opposed to sexual–drives at the core of Freud's pleasure principle and Lacan's breached subject in "*moi*" and "*je*." This desire which splits the subject (and is thus based on lack) is countered by Levinasian desire that moulds the subject when called to address the other (inspiring what Levinas terms 'infinity' as opposed to 'totality,' an infinity pitted against the nothingness crucial to pessimist and nihilist readings). The centrality of desire in Leopardi's and Beckett's later work can also be defined through the Lacanian desire-as-paradox lodged at the innermost core of dianoetic laughter and held to be expressive of a

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[1] Schopenhauer affirms that "what someone truly wills, the striving from his innermost essence and the goal he pursues accordingly . . . could never alter with external influences such as instruction: otherwise we could recreate him" (1: 321). Schopenhauer here admits the essential inner immutable core of desire, or, as the Latin Stoic Seneca puts it "*velle non discitur*" ("willing cannot be taught" 81: 14). Motives can only alter the direction of their striving, but not the striving itself.

similarly-conceived dark, but elevating, humour in the two authors. This dianoetic laughter is manifest in Leopardi's moral tales "Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri" and "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" as well as in Beckett's plays *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Not I*.

Leopardi's and Beckett's art then, is not simply concerned with the Schopenhauerian attempt to rip the flimsy film of desiring and willing in order to reach pure aesthetic contemplation. Nor can existential pain simply be eased through the cessation of one's strivings. In the pages that follow, I show how for both authors there is a paradoxical human desire that (differently from the "subjective spirit of base desire" that Schopenhauer debunks as the stimulating in art [1: 233]) compels the individual to endure his existence. My contention is that the easing of existential anguish lies in the final acceptance that the human being cannot become void of desire. This inextinguishable desire−positive in effect, albeit challenging to experience−can bring about compassion.

Schopenhauer claims that "all love (*caritas*) is compassion" (1: 401). Compassion, says Schopenhauer, "is apparent in our heartfelt participation in the friend's well-being and woe and the selfless sacrifices made on account of the latter" (1: 403). This conception of compassion in Schopenhauer could, to a degree, be construed as rooted in Leopardi, where compassion entails being able to feel other individuals' suffering (see 1.2.1; 2.3.2; 3.2). It is a notion, however, that differs from, for instance, Levinas's, because while in Schopenhauer compassion is found by stilling desire, in Levinas compassion undergoes an inverse movement (see 1.5). I will be arguing for a desire that, in spite of the attempt to still its source, paradoxically brings about more of a Levinasian kind of compassion. In "La Ginestra," *Endgame* and *Happy Days* the self becomes a compassionate subject in being, as in Levinas, "unable to shirk: this is the 'I'" (*Totality and Infinity* 245). The desiring subject thus has a pivotal role to play in the desire for the O/other, a Lacanian desire characterized by a 'coring out' effect, albeit also a Levinasian desire in its being-for-the-other. It is also a desire that admits its earthly insignificance through humour–a humour that encompasses Freudian death and life-drives, Lacanian demand versus desire (see 1.4.2), or what Gavriel Reisner terms, "an opposition to desire within the ego . . . anti-desire," pitted against "a force of desire which supersedes the ego" (14).

This dissertation unfolds in four chapters, framed by the present introduction and a conclusion. In chapter one, I briefly trace the theme of desire, contextualizing my choice of writers in the specific designated framework, delving at some length on the contributions of Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Freud, Lacan and Levinas, all relevant in the shaping of Beckettian desire.

I prepare the groundwork for the discussion of desire as the outcome of the human subject's division. It is a discussion whose trajectory passes through Leopardi's desire of *amor proprio* (building on eighteenth-century conceptions of *amour propre*) and develops into Schopenhauerian Will as opposed to its negation. It passes through Freud's death as opposed to life-drives and Lacan's cleaved subject into "*moi*" and "*je*," where the "*moi*" is specifically equated by Lacan to *amour propre* (see 1.4.1). In this manner I lay the basis for the analysis, in the third chapter, of Leopardi's poetic voices and the utterances of Beckett's dramatic characters. The voices' and characters' attempt at, and failure to, come to terms with the elusive nature of their speech can be equated with the impossibility of reunifying Lacan's split subject. An immediate consequence is that desire is displaced onto the violence of a language that cuts up what it addresses and represents an act that, I argue, is repeated in the speech spewed out by Mouth in *Not I*, Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* and Winnie in *Happy Days*.[2] This speech, however, is also examined in *Endgame* and *Happy Days* through the 'Saying,' the being-for-the-Other, conceived according to the philosophical analysis of Levinas.

In chapter two, "A dull and indistinct pain: 'Vain longing that vain longing go,'" I briefly review the criticism that construes Leopardi and Beckett as pessimists, nihilists and existentialists. I explore the negation of desire, crucial to Leopardian *atarassia* tinged by "*souffrance*" (see 2.1) and Beckettian "suffering of being," arguing that both writers' work stems (but also significantly differs) from pessimism, nihilism (and existentialism). Their work ultimately concedes the imperishable quality of human desire.

In chapter three, "Making Suffering Sufferable: Desire for the Other in Leopardi and Beckett," I flesh out the discussion revolving around irreducible desire by arguing for a

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[2] The direct consideration of desire in Lacan, as in *amour courtois* to which it inspires, reveals the very impossibility of its completion and wholeness while the discourses that sublimate desire in the same courtly love tradition are as direct as their detours.

desire that hangs in the balance between the Lacanian and Levinasian notions. I suggest that desire as presented in the two writers' oeuvres goes beyond anything that could possibly offer fulfilment. Desire is a surplus always exterior to Levinas' 'totality' because it affirms the otherness, integrity and transcendence of the Other. Desire here goes beyond the Beckettian "suffering of being" or Leopardian *atarassia* (tinged by "*souffrance*"), because it wrestles free of the disintegrating effect of this epiphanic moment and instead engages with the other with an eye to serve. It compels one to first freely make a choice for the traumatizing face-to-face encounter—the choice to oppose nothingness through the (painful) evocation of infinity. The face of the other (who is Other) represents what Levinas refers to as 'exteriority' (otherness, infinity, what disrupts and destabilizes sameness, the 'Saying' over the 'Said'). The Leopardian poetic voices and the Beckettian interlocutors, in their desolate and marginal existence, are torn and split subjects. They, nonetheless, take account of the strange world inhabited by the other person who, on being addressed, becomes Other.

Language, notwithstanding its elusive quality, can thus serve as a vehicle through which desire is channelled—a desire that is insatiable, endlessly-reproductive, asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, and non-dialogic, albeit yearning for that which transcends the 'I.' The essence of language is the relation with the Other: "It is the ethical exigency of the face, which puts into question the consciousness that welcomes it. The consciousness of obligation is no longer a consciousness, since it tears consciousness up from its centre, submitting it to the Other" (*TI* 207). This submission is metaphysical desire which interprets the production of being as goodness.

Following Levinas, I thus argue that the ethical relation with the Other has to be thought beyond the confines of the system of language which has invariably made it end in 'totality.' In seeing a beyond not only to being, but also to language, in underscoring the "Saying" over the "Said," Levinas shifts priority onto the interpersonal encounter. I construe the foundational power of the 'ethical encounter' in "La Ginestra," *Endgame* and *Happy Days* in forging community with the other person: "if communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given. This means that I must be ready to put my world into words, and to offer it to the other … by first freely making a choice for generosity and communication" (*Totality and Infinity* 14). Levinas' Other saddles the 'I' with unfamiliarity and even alienation but concomitantly binds it with commitment. In

Levinas the pre-other self is thus an "I" that answers the call which, unlike in Lacan, leads less to alienation than to inspiration.

In both Leopardi and Beckett the conflicting presence of what could be construed as Lacanian torn subjects who are, however, confronted by the Levinasian good-of-the-other, makes the balance tip towards a Levinasian desire that can potentially enable unique compassion: "In the irreplaceable subject, unique and chosen as a responsibility and a substitution–a mode of freedom, ontologically impossible, breaks the unreadable essence. Substitution frees the subject from *ennui*, that is, from the enchainment to itself where the ego suffocates in itself" (*Otherwise Than Being* 124). More than bringing about compassion as a psychological event, desire is thus equated with being obsessed with the other, putting oneself in the place of another.

In chapter four, "The Paradoxical In-Between Space for Desire: Leopardi's and Beckett's Humour," I take up the thread of my argument again, this time examining the role of infinite desire at the core of the intriguingly dark humour that characterizes the Leopardian and Beckettian oeuvre. I contextualize the two authors' contribution in a lineage of theories of the comic, exploring the development of the dianoetic laugh, particularly its taking root in the two writers in question. I argue for the role of Lacanian desire at the kernel of *humour noir*, channelling attention towards bringing out its Freudian legacy. Desire-as-paradox at the crux of the dianoetic laugh−and thus the lack of will to desire counterpoised to the infinitely self-regenerating desire−are interlocked within the soul of the catastrophically sombre laughter generated by Leopardi's ventriloquists Filippo Ottonieri and Eleandro in the *Operette morali*. The same murky humour reverberates in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Not I*.

Chapter 1

1   On Desire

1.1   What Desire?

"A se stesso," Leopardi's poem quoted by Beckett primarily in *Proust*, is central in affirming the fundamental common ground in Leopardi's and Beckett's respective existential enquiry. The removal of desire in Leopardi, explicitly announced in "A se stesso," knows its roots and motivations in the famous terrifying inscription above the garden of unhappiness which defines the Leopardian "*souffrance*":

> Entrate in un giardino di piante, d'erbe, di fiori. Sia pur quanto volete ridente. Sia nella più mite stagione dell'anno. Voi non potete volger lo sguardo in nessuna parte che voi non vi troviate del patimento. Tutta quella famiglia di vegetali è in stato di "*souffrance*," qual individuo più, qual meno. (*Zibaldone* 4175-78)

> Enter a garden of plants, of herbs and flowers; Even the most delightful of gardens. Even in the mildest of seasons. You cannot look anywhere but you will find it suffused with pain. All that family of plants is, to a degree, in a state of "*souffrance*." Some of those plants suffer more, some others suffer less. (my translation)

"A se stesso" is again cited by Beckett, this time the opening line in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* where Leopardi is jeeringly placed in a list of mostly fictitious writers of "gloomy composition":

> . . . he declined the darkest passages of Schopenhauer, Vigny, Leopardi, Espronceda, Inge, Hatiz, Saadi, Espronerda, Becquer and the other Epimethei. All day he told the beads of his spleen. Or posa per sempre, for example, he was liable to murmur, lifting and shifting the seat of the disturbance, stanco mio cor. Assai palpitasti . . . and as much of that gloomy composition as he could

remember. (61-2)

Once more the emaciation of desire is instigated by suffering and is a result of desire fleeing into the inner core of existential agony where, as Beckett writes in *Proust*, "the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being" (19). This idea is, to a degree, prefigured by Leopardi in "Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e il suo genio familiare" where "la vita umana . . . è composta e intessuta, parte di dolore, parte di noia; dall'una delle quali passioni non ha riposo se non cadendo nell'altra." ("human life is made up of and interwoven partly with suffering and partly with boredom; and it cannot escape from one except by falling into the other"; *Operette morali* 176-7). The suffering that underlies boredom and desire is overwhelming: "E questo [il patimento] è il più potente di tutti: perché l'uomo mentre patisce, non si annoia per niuna maniera" ("And the latter [suffering] is the most powerful of all, for as he suffers, the human being can in no way be bored"; *Operette morali* 178). Schopenhauer corroborates this thought when he says, "our mental activity is a continuously delayed boredom" (1: 338) because "life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom" (1: 338).

Suffering replacing boredom is also paramount in the second and third quotations from Leopardi that Beckett uses in *Proust*. The second quotation is inserted in a context where Beckett is alluding to choice as indicative of will. He argues that it is to the obliteration of will, as of desire, that the wise aspire:

> … And as before, wisdom consists in obliterating the faculty of suffering rather than in a vain attempt to reduce the stimuli that exasperate that faculty. 'Non che la speme, il desiderio…' One desires to be understood because one desires to be loved, and one desires to be loved because one loves. We are indifferent to the understanding of others, and their love is an importunity. (63)

Desire consumes humanity, which idea again justifies the third Leopardian quotation "e fango è il mondo," initially serving as an epigraph in *Proust*.[3] This verse is quoted again

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[3] The full quotation: "Amaro e noia | La vita; altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo" ("Boredom and bitterness | is life; it is nothing but this; the world is dirt"; my translation) is taken from the same poem "A se stesso" lines 9-10 (see 3.3).

in *Molloy*, where the Leopardian truncated quotation is found in an intentionally obscene context highlighting the ubiquity of suffering exposed by tearing through boredom. Even within Molloy's will to be amputated there is an amputation of the Leopardian quotation on desire to be found in *Proust*. The implication seems to be, once again, that the sage-ideal Beckett is proposing through Leopardi is a failed sage:

> It was she dug the hole because I couldn't, though I was the gentleman, because of my leg . . . I had so to speak only one leg at my disposal, I was virtually one-legged, and I would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin. And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn't have objected. For from such testicles as mine, dangling at mid-thigh at the end of a meagre cord, there was nothing more to be squeezed, not a drop. So that non che la speme il desiderio, and I longed to see them gone, from the old stand where they bore false witness, for and against, in the lifelong charge against me. (35)

This chapter contextualizes the significance of Beckett's Leopardian quotations on desire by delineating the etymology of the two authors' conceptions of desire. The development of the two authors' notions in relation to thinkers like Schopenhauer will be of particular interest. The line of argumentation will then be sustained through twentieth-century philosophies of desire, primarily the propositions by Lacan (preceded by Freud) and Levinas, highlighting aspects that can be read in both Leopardi and Beckett.

It is important, at the outset, to define idiosyncratic references that are at the kernel of the argument. The distinction between the desire of the O/other, for instance, is pivotal. The desire of the other with a lower case 'o', as conceived by Lacan, is the other who is a reflection and projection of the ego. In this way the little other is inscribed in what Lacan calls the Imaginary order (see 1.4.1). The Lacanian big Other, on the other hand, designates an otherness transcending the illusory otherness of the Imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law: the big Other is inscribed in what Lacan calls the Symbolic order. Lacan states, "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject" (*Écrits*

7).[4] I thus speak, as in Lacan, of the Other as the object of unconscious desire. Nonetheless, the "other" as another subject is equally barred from unconscious desire (as an Other).[5] The Other can thus be construed as both the Lacanian Other who is forever painfully longed-for but remains elusive and perennially splits the subject as much as the obscurity of the other person. It is an internal/external other. The desire for the Other remains forever elusive in Lacan, while the desire for the other as an ontologically robust presence remains central in Levinas. It is indeed in Lacan and Levinas that the otherwise overused term "other" becomes Other–terms that are the linchpin of the two thinkers' respective revolutionary projects.

A word is at this point also necessary as to why Lacan and Levinas will be brought together on the question of desire in Leopardi and Beckett. For years, these two thinkers were read in isolation from one another, owing to antagonism between their respective methodological approaches–a modification of Husserlian phenomenology for Levinas (see 1.5), and a (post) structuralist version of Freudian psychoanalysis for Lacan (see 1.4).[6] I bring Lacan and Levinas together (and this becomes a fully-fledged

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[4] The term "other" was widely used in France by the 1950s. The influence of G.W.F Hegel had made the term a cliché. This explains Lacan's warning: "I is an other . . . Don't let this impress you! . . . The other–don't use this term as mouthwash" (*Seminar Book II* 7).

[5] The other is more than simply the other person; the other is conceived in this study as otherness as seen in the face-to-face encounter, in the reality of death as the ultimate other, in the image of the self as self/other in the mirror, in the image of the other as unity as seen through the eyes of the infant. The Other, on the other hand, is formed in the subject's subjection to the order of sexual difference and thus to language. As will be explained in 1.4.1, for Lacan it is precisely through language that sexual identity is produced in the subject. We thus speak of the "Other" (capital O) when the other is not the one seen in the mirror during what Lacan defines as the Mirror Stage, but the one which represents the entrance into the Symbolic Order, the Law of the Father, the Phallus as transcendental signifier. Lacan asks, "Which other is this, then, to whom I am more attached than to myself? …His presence can only be understood in an alterity raised to the second power, which already situates him in a mediating position in relation to my own splitting from myself, as if from a semblable. I have said that the unconscious is the Other's discourse (with a capital O), it is in order to indicate the beyond in which the recognition of desire is tied to the desire for recognition. In other words, this other is the Other that even my lie invokes as a guarantor of the truth in which my lie subsists" (*Écrits* 436; see 1.4.1). In "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" Lacan goes on to say: "the unconscious is (the) discourse about the Other…But we must also add that man's desire is the Other's desire…namely that it is qua Other that man desires" (*Écrits* 690).

[6] Levinas's relationship to phenomenology changes because while his early work is clearly phenomenological in method, he moves into tricky territory when he discovers the non-phenomenon of the face, that which cannot be contained in consciousness. By the time he moves from *Totality and Infinity* (1961) to *Otherwise than Being* (1974), a radical change has taken place in the Levinasian approach. In his later work, particularly *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas recognized the problem of the ontological bent of his earlier work and shifts away from it (see 1.5). In so doing, as I mention in chapter three, Levinas inched closer to, though without meeting, Lacan.

comparison in the third chapter) without attempting to efface their differences in any way. Their opposition is not only not ignored, but rather celebrated in the spirit of true dialogue. Though it will seem that the positions of Lacan and Levinas cannot both be true, it is precisely the truth of both positions with relation to the Leopardian and Beckettian texts that I will be arguing for when discussing desire in chapter three.

For Lacan the psychoanalytic study of subjectivity, in the uncovering of desire, leads to knowledge of the Unconscious. It is only in understanding unconscious desire that one can lift the symptoms caused by psychic conflict. Levinas, on the other hand, retrieves from the immemorial past that something which structures one as subject for-the-other, even though it means to do so without specific prescriptions of content. In both cases before being the Cartesian ego, the 'I' is a subject.[7] Lacanian theory is anti-humanist in its emphasis on the subject's failure to coincide with itself. Levinasian theory is post-humanist in the manner in which the 'I' is always already by and for-the-other.[8] I argue toward a theory of the Leopardian and Beckettian subject traversed by an inextinguishable desire, but who is also a subject desiring-the-good-of-the-other. The latter is framed within a theory of ethical subjectivity.[9]

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[7] "Self" is a term that Lacan avoids at every turn since he considers it wrapped in humanist meaning. Lacan uses the term "subject"–emphasizing the subjected nature of the person and its radical linguistic and cultural construction. In his post 1950s work, however, Lacan reserves the term "subject" for the subject in language that is he reserves the term for one who has moved from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The imaginary ego and the imaginary I are not yet "subjects" because they are still defined primarily by the intersubjective exchange between child and (m) other. See 1.4.1.

[8] Lacan and Levinas posit the human person as subject to forces outside of herself. From this point of view they go against the humanist tradition understood as the dominant way of thinking about the human person in the Enlightenment and beyond. As I shall underscore, however, Lacan and Levinas refused the humanist tradition in different ways. In the case of Lacan, we speak of anti-humanism marked by the choice of the terminology "subject" (from *sub-jectum*) rather than human "self." The reality of subjectivity here is subjection and subjugation. Lacan expresses his indictment of the Cartesian cogito as follows: "The promotion of consciousness as essential to the subject in the historical aftermath of the Cartesian cogito is indicative, to my mind, of a misleading emphasis on the transparency of the *I* in action at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines it" (*Écrits* 685). In "Subjection and Subjectivation," Balibar insists that the concept of subjectivity stands as a challenge to precisely that idea of self-knowledge implicit in the cogito and in all its post-Cartesian forms. Levinas, on the other hand, deals with the post-human, specifically through the humanism of the other person. The latter humanism, as I shall argue, determines one's own, rupturing one's subjectivity. Nonetheless, the Levinasian subject is a 'self' before it is called to be for-the-other and, as such, radically differs from the anti-humanist theory of Lacan (see 3.1).

[9] By ethical subjectivity I mean to designate an approach that takes as its goal the explication of the ethical nature of the human person, the latter taking as its starting point the anti-humanist critique of the self and positing of the subject qua *subjectum* in its place (See 3.1). In Lacan, the unearthing of the unconscious

The use of desire in this study is thus both based on, and concomitantly contrasts with, the classics, Plato and Aristotle in particular.[10] The thought of Levinas, for instance, is a dialectic response to Platonic conceptions of desire (see 1.5.6). Plato describes desire as responsiveness to form which is different from the Levinasian concept where desire is an open responsiveness, beyond or before form. Nonetheless, the concept put forward in very different terms by both Lacan and Levinas, whereby the construction of one's identity occurs through the desire of and for the Other, is already expressed in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, where the desirable is presented as a reflection of the soul desiring another.

1.2   Desire as Lack

As early as *Symposium*, desire highlights what would become one of the guiding threads in Leopardi's and Beckett's respective conceptions, the dearth through which one recognizes the potential completion of one's own need.[11] Desire as lack is present in its

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aims to bring to the fore the Freudian dictum: "where it was, I must come into being. This goal is one of reintegration and harmony, I might even say of reconciliation" (*Écrits* 435).

[10] Among the very first writings to inform the western conception of desire are Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium,* and excerpts in *Republic*. In *Republic* Plato offers a description of the three types of desire in the soul: the appetitive, the spiritual and the rational (*nous*). *Thumos* is the motivational element desiring what it takes to be good, beautiful or true. As to the Aristotelian concept, in *De Anima* 3: 9-11, Aristotle accepts Plato's three kinds of desire, but refutes the Platonic tripartition of the soul. In *De Anima* Aristotle insists that desire takes place in the en-souled body. As to the irrationality of human desire, which Aristotle highlights, this seems to go against the Socratic conception as it is presented in the earlier Platonic dialogues whereby human desire aims at the good and is thus fundamentally rational. In *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle explains how the weak-willed agent's beliefs do not shape his desires. For Aristotle, desire plays an important role in ethical behaviour. Desiring the right thing is pivotal to Aristotle's account of virtue. Aristotle makes choice (*prohairesis*) a necessary condition for the possession of virtue and he defines choice as deliberate desire (*Nichomachean Ethics* III.3 1113a11; VI.2 1139a23). Aristotelian desire is thus not the same as *eros*, *philia*, *nomos* or *theoria* but it functions between knowledge and action.

[11] Aristophanes proposes a theory of desire based on lack whereby the innate human desire for one another brings the human being back to his original state, trying to reunite and restore him to his true human form: "Each of us is a mere fragment of a man (like half a tally-stick); we've been split in two, like filleted plaice. We're all looking for our 'other half'" (Plato, *Symposium* 36). Socrates, however, rejects Aristophanes' view. For Socrates, *eros* does not return to the self: "love is not love of a half, nor of a whole, unless it is good… the good is the only object of human love" (*Symposium* 58). It is the desire for the permanent possession of the good beyond being that characterizes Socratic love (a phrase Levinas will later adopt). Indeed Socrates' famous comment in *Republic* Book 10 on what imitative poetry generally appeals to, totally relegates the role of appetitive desire *per se*. As is the case with desire-involving pains and pleasures in the soul, imitative poetry has the very same effect: "It nurtures and waters them and establishes them as

incipient form in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* where the frustrated attempt at reaching the fullness of knowing, having, or being with the "other" is crucial. This dualistic dynamic, which is also one of repulsion and attraction as well as pain and pleasure, takes on a specific discursive form, in Freud's language, as *Thanatos*, yoked in sublimated form to the life-yielding project of *Eros*.

The forces of pleasure and pain, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, or, desire versus anti-desire (see introduction), are crucial to the development of Leopardian philosophy, whose influence crosshatches intellectual history, with the most immediate and prominent heir being Schopenhauer, succeeded by early Nietzsche (see 2.4) and Freud (1.3). Schopenhauer echoes Leopardian thought when he states, "procreation and death are to be thought of as belonging to life and essential to the appearance of the will" (1: 303; see 1.2.2). Antonio Prete goes a step further and reads Leopardian desire as a manifestation of the *Eros-Thanatos* dilemma of the Freudian death drive (17) and, in this context, reads Leopardi as a precursor of Lacan.[12]

1.2.1 Leopardian Desire: "l'isperanza di esser quieto"

Desire is the initial and final concern of Leopardi's philosophical speculation. Desire for pleasure (and thus the search for happiness) is "una pena, e una specie di travaglio abituale per l'anima" ("a pain, and a kind of habitual labour for the soul"; *Zibaldone* 172,1; my translation) and only those who have perpetually suffered can recognize its essence.[13] Desire is crucial to Leopardi's "*teoria del piacere*" (theory of

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rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled" (*Republic* 606 D 1-7). The theory of halves of Aristophanes is also mentioned by Lacan (*Écrits* 717).

[12] Alberto Folin agrees with reservation with Prete's interpretation: "non c'è da stupirsi che una parte della critica leopardiana più recente abbia imboccato senza riserve la via dell'attualizzazione, individuando nel filosofo-poeta di Recanati un anticipatore illustre di Freud, di Heidegger, e di Marcuse, se non addirittura di Lacan e di Deleuze. Nessuno scandalo per questo genere di lettura che, se contenuta entro i limiti del rispetto filologico dei testi . . . può risultare efficace" ("it is not surprising that a section of recent Leopardi criticism has fallen prey to interpretations which construe the Recanati poet-philosopher as a worthy precursor of Freud, Heidegger and Marcuse, if not also Lacan and Deleuze. These interpretations are not scandalous, and if carried out in full respect of the philological limits of the text, they can be efficacious"; 95; my translation).

[13] Leopardi's philosophical speculation started from the initially strictly physical sensation of suffering. As he says: "La mutazione totale in me, . . . seguì . . . dentro un anno, . . . nel 1819, dove privato dell'uso della

pleasure), which, as Alberto Folin points out, owes considerably to the idea of pleasure as a distraction from pain widely in circulation among Enlightenment thinkers (97).[14] Folin affirms that the definition of pleasure as the cessation of pain is largely expounded by the *Idéologues* starting with P.-L.-M. Maupertius (96).[15] Luigi Derla draws an important distinction between the Italian thinkers of the eighteenth-century, in whom the concern with pleasure is always connected with its social aspect, and the modern insight of Leopardi who alerted his readers to the importance of focusing on the individual's suffering and thus the impossibility of speaking of a collective happiness (149).[16] Derla also highlights how pleasure as a distraction from the agonizing human condition at the mercy of an insatiable desire is already found in many Enlightenment thinkers. The same line of argumentation is followed by Luca Sorrentino in "Leopardi e la teoria del piacere nel 700" where the eighteenth-century pursuit of public happiness is pitted against

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vista, e della continua distrazione della lettura, cominciai a sentire la mia infelicità in un modo assai più tenebroso, cominciai . . . a riflettere profondamente sopra le cose, . . . a divenire filosofo di professione" ("the total change in me, . . . took place . . . in a year, . . . in 1819, when deprived of the use of sight, and of the ongoing distraction of reading, I started feeling my unhappiness in a much more acute and darker way, I started . . . to reflect profoundly on things . . . to become a philosopher by profession"; *Zibaldone* 162; my translation).

[14] Leopardi's "*teoria del piacere*" is mostly expostulated in the entries in the *Zibaldone* dated between the 12th and the 23rd of July 1820. In these indices, Leopardi defines pleasure as the cessation of pain and thus as characterized by negativity. Also see Derla, 148-69.

[15] The nature of pleasure, the object of desire and self-love, had certainly become particularly major in the philosophical thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The major Italian theoreticians of sensationalism in aesthetics and ethics in the eighteenth century were Cesare Beccaria and Alessandro and Pietro Verri. Pietro Verri had written the essay "Discorso sull'indole del piacere e del dolore" (1773) which Leopardi does not quote but he does use citations on this subject by C. Montesquieu and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, whose lesson Verri had assimilated. The doctrine of desire, however, is also central to Etienne Bonnot de Condillac who called desire "le plus pressant de tous nos besoins" (*Animaux* 597-98). Condillac is listed by Giuseppe Pacella in "Elenchi di letture leopardiane" as an author read by Leopardi (574). The influence of French eighteenth-century writers like J.J. Rousseau, C. Montesquieu, C.A. Helvétius and E.B. de Condillac (but also Voltaire, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, Maupertius and Mme de Staël) is discussed in Serban's *Leopardi et la France* (1913) and many essays by Alberto Frattini, particularly "Leopardi e gli ideologi francesi del Settecento" in *Leopardi e il Settecento*. Leopardi departs from the same point where Condillac leaves off and develops his theory of desire as the very essence of human nature: "L'anima umana . . . desidera sempre essenzialmente, e mira unicamente . . . al piacere ossia alla felicità" ("The human soul . . . is essentially in a perennial state of want, and aims solely . . . at pleasure or better at happiness"; *Zibaldone* 182; my translation).

[16] Indeed, unlike the *Idéologues*, who after rejecting innatism and abolishing metaphysics turned to deal with the social aspect of the human being, for Leopardi, the abolition of metaphysics (even though it is debatable whether we can actually speak of the complete abolition of metaphysics in Leopardi) did not, strictly speaking, imply an involvement in social problems.

Leopardi's drive for unattainable absolute pleasure.[17] Daniela Bini points out that eighteenth-century sensationalists and materialists like J.-O. La Mettrie, Denis Diderot and P-.J.-G. Cabanis, have long been recognized by criticism to have been influential on Leopardi. She claims that Leopardi's materialism à la Mettrie, however, developed into something closer to the pessimism of the Marquis de Sade in his conception of destructive nature (87-88). In his formulation of the theory of pleasure, Leopardi followed not just sensationalism and materialism but another central creed of the eighteenth-century−empiricism–mentioning and building directly on John Locke.

Agreeing with Locke and the *Idéologues* he wrote: "è già stabilito dagli ideologi che il progresso delle cognizioni umane consiste nel conoscere che un'idea ne contiene un'altra (così Locke, Tracy etc.) e questa un'altra ec" ("It has been established by the *Idéologues* that the progress of human cognitions consists in knowing that one idea contains another [and thus Locke, Tracy etc.] and this yet another"; *Zibaldone* 832; my translation).

The opposition between the human being's overall desire for infinite happiness and the limited and delusory nature of reality is the fundamental theme of Leopardi's lyrics (see 3.2). Pleasure is fictitious as is clear in the negative definition given in the poems "La quiete dopo la tempesta" ("The Calm After the Storm") and "Il sabato del villaggio" ("Saturday in the Village"). The eternal anguish caused by desire is well-expressed in the last lines of the moral tale, "Dialogo di un venditore d'almanacchi e di un passeggere" where the *passeggere* concludes: "Quella vita ch'è una cosa bella, non è la vita che si conosce, ma quella che non si conosce; non la vita passata, ma la futura" ("The life that's beautiful is not the life we know, but the life we don't know; not the past life, but the future"; *Operette morali* 480-81). Desire is thus felt most acutely during childhood and in courtship, both being periods in the individual's life when, according to Leopardi, the expression of desire is tied to its future fruition.[18] Leopardi concludes:

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[17] Sorrentino interestingly compares Leopardi's concept of desire with Hegel's dialectic of desire, which was also inspirational to Lacanian desire.

[18] As Folin states, Leopardi's interest in pleasure is not simply empirical (and this explains why Leopardi significantly does not distinguish physical from moral sensation) but it goes right to the core of the ontological question of 'unpleasure.' Pleasure is not an act but tension towards the act. Pleasure can never

> Conseguito un piacere, l'anima non cessa di desiderare il piacere, come non cessa mai di pensare, perché il pensiero e il desiderio del piacere sono due operazioni egualmente continue e inseparabili dalla sua esistenza. (*Zibaldone* 183)

> Once a pleasure is satisfied, the soul does not cease to desire pleasure, as it does not cease to think, because both the thought and the desire of pleasure are two activities which are equally incessant and inseparable from existence. (my translation)

The illusion of infinity is a moral sensation that can only be produced by rhetorical re-figurations of the past (memory) or future (hope) and thus the pillars of Leopardi's poetics are *rimembranza*, *speranza* and *desiderio*. It is intriguing to note that *speme* or *speranza*, (hope), and *desiderio* (desire), are interlaced concepts in Leopardi (see 2.1), as is also clear in the Leopardian quotation Beckett chooses to repeatedly cite: "non che la speme il desiderio è spento." Although in Leopardi the nexus between desire and hope is an important one, and the Italian poet ultimately admits the irreducibility of both, in Beckett this interweaving is not as smooth. While I argue that the inextinguishable quality of desire is recognized by Beckett, this is not the case with hope which is mostly debunked.[19] Nonetheless, it is not to be overlooked that as a widely-read and well-informed reader of Leopardi, Beckett would have certainly been aware of the implications of the chosen quotations.

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be in the present (102).This starts to hint at the connection, in Leopardi as in subsequent theoreticians of desire (including Beckett in *Proust*), between desire and memory.

[19] In Beckett hope is discussed in the "Clare Street Notebook," particularly in an entry dated August 11, 1936: "There are moments where the veil of hope is finally ripped away and the eyes, suddenly liberated, see *their* world as it is, as it must be. Alas, it does not last long, the perception quickly passes: the eyes can only bear such a merciless light for a short while, the thin skin of hope re-forms and one returns to the world of phenomena. . . . Hope is the cataract of the spirit that cannot be pierced until it is ripe for decay. Not every cataract ripens: many a human being spends his whole life enveloped in the mist of hope. And even if the cataract can be pierced for a moment it almost always re-forms immediately; and thus it is with hope. And people never tire of applying to themselves the comforting clichés inspired by hope" (UoR MS 5003, 33, 35 cited in Matthew Feldman's "Sourcing 'Aporetics': An Empirical Study on philosophical Influences in the Development of Samuel Beckett's Writing," 394-95). I argue that Beckett's later works, however, while portraying hope as hellish, make no bones about the equally hellish condition of hopelessness (see 3.3; 3.4).

In Leopardi, hope cannot ever be completely depleted to the extent that "anche una scintilla, una goccia di lei, non abbandona l'uomo, neppur accadutagli la disgrazia la più diametralmente contraria ad essa speranza" ("even a glitter, a drop of it [hope], remains in the individual and this is the case even when the worst of calamities, the ones that are most adverse to hope, befall him"; *Zibaldone* 285,1; my translation). "Speranza" (hope) and "desiderio" (desire) thus become interlaced with the "indefinito" (indefinite): "Dalla mia teoria del piacere seguita che l'uomo, desiderando sempre un piacere infinito e che lo sodisfi intieramente, desideri sempre e speri una cosa ch'egli non può concepire" ("From my theory of pleasure it follows that the individual, always desiring an infinite pleasure which pleases him entirely, is perennially desiring and hoping for something which he cannot conceive"; *Zibaldone* 1017,1; my translation). As Folin insists, desire for Leopardi is "ontologicamente vano in quanto esso non è mai realizzabile" ("*ontologically* impossible in that it cannot ever be realized"; 102; my translation and emphasis). The reference to "Speranza" in the excerpts posthumously collected in the *Zibaldone* as *Trattato delle passioni* is linked to the desire for happiness (see 2.4.2; 3.2): "Tanto è lungi dal vero che la speranza o il desiderio possano mai abbandonare un essere che non esiste se non per amarsi, e proccurare il suo bene, e se non quanto si ama" ("It is far from the truth that hope or desire could ever abandon the human being in that he exists only insofar as he can satisfy his self-love and bring about his own well-being, in direct proportion to self-love"; *Zibaldone* 1547,1; my translation). Hope and desire are both characterized by the indeterminacy that imbues the individual's imaginings of past and future, as well as her or his anticipation of pleasure, including the "piacere della disperazione" ("the pleasure of despair").[20] Leopardi ironically concludes that the experience of pleasure in the present is a most unhappy moment in life. Schopenhauer will similarly state that "the form of the will's appearance . . . is really just the present" (1: 304).

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[20] By October 18, 1825, Leopardi will question the sole existence of despair: "Disperazione, rigorosamente parlando, non si dà" ("Despair, strictly speaking, does not exist"; my translation). Despair is interwoven with thought, desire and hope, all becoming central to Leopardian ethics: "Ella è cosa forse o poco o nulla o non abbastanza osservata che la speranza è una passione, un modo di essere, così inerente e inseparabile dal sentimento della vita, cioè dalla vita propriamente detta, come il pensiero, e come l'amor di sé stesso, e il desiderio del proprio bene. Io vivo, dunque io spero" ("It has been ignored or overlooked that hope is a passion, a way of being which is inseparable from the feeling of life, from life in its essence like thought, self-love and the desire of one's own well-being. I live, therefore I hope"; *Zibaldone* 4145; my translation).

Leopardi thus underscores both the promise of pleasure and the consuming effect of this promise. The pivot of desire hinges primarily on *amor proprio* and *amor di sé* (both forms of self-love) at the roots of all feeling.[21] *Amor proprio* is the basic form of all love that bears the marks of *eros*–desire characterized by lack. Desire of *amor proprio* and, consequently, desire of pleasure, usurp all man's effort: "L'uomo (per l'amore della vita) ama naturalmente e desidera e abbisogna di sentire, o gradevolmente, o comunque, purché sia vivamente" ("The individual [for the love of life] naturally loves and desires and needs to feel, pleasurably or at least intensely"; *Zibaldone* 891; my translation). The restless and infinite desire of *amor proprio*, insatiably searches for satisfaction, placing pleasure at its horizon and conceiving of pleasure as a necessary passageway to (illusory) happiness: "Giacchè il desiderio non è d'altro che del piacere, e l'amor della felicità non è altro che l'amor proprio" ("Given that desire is nothing but desire of pleasure, and love of happiness is nothing but self-love"; *Zibaldone* 2495; my translation).[22] Thus ends can never be fulfilled and suffering is ever-present.

Self-love degenerates into selfishness when the individual enters in contact with others. When *amor proprio* is taken to an extreme, it reflects the egoistic outlook of the "secolo superbo e sciocco" ("proud and foolish century"; see 3.2) where egoism crystallizes sentiment into the *mauvaise honte* which originates from Jean Jacques Rousseau (2.4.1). *Amor proprio* is mentioned by Lacan when he refers to eighteenth-century discussions on self-love, primarily through La Rochefoucauld's idea of the resistance of *amour-propre*, on which desire is based. *Amour Propre* in Lacan is located

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[21] Leopardi is influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau's distinction between *amour propre* and *amour de soi*. It is pertinent to point out that Rousseau's distinction pits the concept of self-love as self-preservation and self-love in its contextualization when it comes in contact with the external world. The idea of *amor proprio* in Leopardi denotes the primitive, infinite passion, which predates all others, but it is also projected negatively when it becomes excessive. References to *amor proprio* are to be found in Leopardi's posthumously-collected indices of the *Zibaldone* in *Trattato delle passioni* where the Italian poet links self-love to the equally infinite desire for pleasure: "La massa dell'amor proprio …*è infinita assolutamente, e per se stessa*" ("Self-love . . . is absolutely infinite and self-reproductive"; 2153,2; my translation). Leopardi says, ". . . coll'intensità della vita cresce quella dell'amor proprio, e l'amor proprio è desiderio della propria felicità, e la felicità è piacere" (". . . as the intensity of life grows, self-love also grows, and self-love is desire for one's own happiness, and happiness is pleasure"; *Zibaldone* 3835,1; my translation).

[22] Leopardi's intention might have been that of demonstrating the immanent and material origin of desire within the human being but in his philosophical interrogation he departs from the stimulus-response in which sensationalist interrogation is locked and introduces the capital distinction between desire of a pleasure and desire of pleasure, the latter paving the way for Freudian drives (see Folin; 104). This desire of pleasure, as in Freud and Lacan differs from need. See Prete; 17-18.

in the Lacanian "*moi*" (see 1.4.1) and is that by which "I can't bear the thought of being freed [from desire] by anyone but myself" (Lacan, *Écrits* 87). As Antonio Prete argues, Leopardi's desire for self-preservation (which is steeped in eighteenth-century discussions on self-love as opposed to the social order of desire) leads to the distinction Freud will make, first in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and then in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, about the death versus life forces (22). This division also becomes pivotal in Lacan.

Leopardi thus speaks of *amor proprio* at the root of an existential "*souffrance*." For Leopardi, the human being who is destined to utmost "*souffrance*" is the ultra-sensitive individual, "l'uomo sensibile," the one endowed with abundant *amor proprio*, epitomized in the child, youth, the people of Antiquity and the uncivilised tribes. In an entry in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi writes:

> L'amor proprio è veramente maggiore assai ne' i fanciulli e ne' i giovani che ne' i maturi e ne' i vecchi, maggiore negli uomini sensibili e immaginosi che ne' i torpidi. I fanciulli, i giovani, gli uomini sensibili sono assai più teneri di sé stessi che nol sono i loro contrarii. Nella stessa guisa discorrasi dei deboli rispetto ai forti e simili. Così generalmente furono gli antichi rispetto ai moderni, e i selvaggi rispetto ai civili, perché più forti di corpo, più forti ed attivi e vivaci d'animo e d'immaginazione (si per le circostanze fisiche, si per le morali), meno disingannati, e insomma maggiormente e più intensamente viventi. (*Zibaldone* 3107,1)

> Self-love is indeed more abundant in children and young individuals rather than in mature and old ones, in sensitive and imaginative beings rather than in the apathetic. Children, young people, sensitive individuals are far more self-loving than their older counterparts. With the same line of argumentation one can conceive of the weak as opposed to the strong. In this manner one can pit the men of Antiquity to modern men, the savages to the civilized, because the former are physically stronger, and thus more active and vivacious in spirit and imagination

(due to both physical circumstances and moral ones), less disillusioned, and more intensely alive. (my translation)

Amor proprio is also directly proportional to fear: "Il timore, passione immediatamente figlia dell'amor proprio e della propria conservazione, e quindi inseparabile dall'uomo, ma sopratutto manifesta e propria nell'uomo primitivo, nel fanciullo, in coloro che più conservano dello stato naturale" ("fear, the immediate heir of self-love and one's own self-preservation, and thus inseparable from man, is primarily manifest in the primitive individual, the child and those who are still proximate to their original state"; *Zibaldone* 2206,1; my translation).

There is thus in desire of *amor proprio* an awareness of an irreversible distance: the distance resulting from a one-way relationship with the pulsating rhythm of *physis*, symbolized by the child, the archetypal imagination and knowledge described by Giambattista Vico (Vichian idea that only the primitive human being was a true poet: see 2.4.1), and the pristine qualities that are proximate to Rousseau's noble savage. Civilization and its knowledge have rendered opaque that same intrinsic relation with *physis*, distracting any attentive listening to the dialogue between finitude and nothingness, the dialogue at the crux of one of the Leopardian definitions of *noia* (see 2.2). This unbridgeable distance is also one of the reasons behind human presumption, a recurrent theme in the *Operette morali*, particularly in "Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo" in which the *folletto* tells the *gnomo*: "Io tengo per fermo che anche le lucertole e i moscerini si credano che tutto il mondo sia fatto a posta per uso della loro specie" ("I firmly believe that even lizards and gnats think that the whole world was especially made for their species"; 90-91).

The insatiable desire of *amor proprio* is the real pathos and its only expression is through *la lontananza*, *l'indefinito*, *il vago* (distance, indefiniteness, vagueness). The dialectical nature of desire is clearly not new to the history of thought and while Leopardi's immediate source must have been Blaise Pascal (*Zibaldone* 474), and (as stated above) French eighteenth-century thinkers, its roots reach as far back as Plato's *Symposium* (see 1.2). Indeed Leopardi's phrase "il troppo produce il nulla"

("excessiveness produces nothingness"; *Zibaldone* 1653,2; my translation) characterizes his entire oeuvre where the paradoxical essence of life is conveyed through a style built on syntactical as well as logical oppositions. Leopardi's poetics is based on a sentiment of the world but a sentiment that, far from being opposed to the theoretical comprehension of things, derives from it. Indeed, what De Sanctis describes in relation to Leopardian composition does not take place accidentally:

> Perché Leopardi produce l'effetto contrario a quello che si propone. Non crede al progresso, e te lo fa desiderare; non crede alla libertà, e te la fa amare. Chiama illusioni l'amore, la gloria, la virtù, e te ne accenda in petto un desiderio inesausto . . . E scettico, e ti fa credente; e mentre non crede possibile un avvenire men tristo per la patria comune, ti desta in seno un vivo amore per quella. . . (*Schopenhauer e Leopardi* 69)

> Because Leopardi produces an opposite effect to the one he proposes. He does not believe in progress, but makes you long for it; he does not believe in freedom, and he ignites love for it. He calls illusions all notions of love, glory, virtue, while firing you up with an insatiable desire for them… He is sceptical, but turns you into a believer; and while he does not believe in a less unhappy future for his country, he flames up your heart with a strong and vivid love for it. . . (my translation)

In Leopardi criticism, De Sanctis was followed by Benedetto Croce (even though their criticism of Leopardi differs considerably), the latter starting a tradition that opposed Leopardi's poetry to his philosophy. This criticism, which also sees Leopardi's so-called pessimistic philosophy as the consequence of his personal unhappiness, forms part of the neo-positivistic school which flourished at the end of the nineteenth-century. Following Croce's dismissal of the importance in Leopardi of the relationship between philosophy and poetry, it was Walter Binni and Cesare Luporini, together with Natalino Sapegno and Sebastiano Timpanaro who revived the interest in Leopardi's philosophical thought and pursued it in a critical fashion (see 3.2). Sapegno in volume III of his *Compendio della letteratura italiana*, Binni in *La nuova poetica leopardiana* and Luporini in *Leopardi*

progressivo dealt a mortal blow to the Crocean interpretation of Leopardi. It was also Binni who first pointed out the poetical value of Leopardi's late poetry.

Thus it is by now well-established that Leopardi's philosophy is inextricably interlaced with his poetics. Leopardian poetics moves from a search for *noncuranza* (see 2.3.1), the "stato di tranquilla disperazione" ("state of quiet despair"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation) and the "isperanza di esser quieto" ("the desire for quietude"; *Zibaldone* 4259,5; my translation) to an abandonment of such aspirations. Stoic philosophy is initially perceived as the wisdom through which painful desire can be eradicated (2.2.1): "Dei beni umani il più supremo colmo è sentir meno il duolo" ("Of all beneficial aspects of humanity the supreme one is when pain is least felt"; *Zibaldone* 2673,3; my translation).[23] Leopardi's translation of Epictetus (and the *Preambolo*) and several indices in the *Zibaldone* posthumously collected as *Manuale di filosofia pratica* (initially *Manuale di filosofia pratica: cioè un Epitteto a modo mio*),[24] reveal, at this early stage, an aspiration towards an ascetic model, a *cura del sé* which attempts to stem the tide of desire and search for "quiete" (quietude). Leopardi says:

> Così oggi fuggo ed odio non solo il discorso, ma spesso anche la presenza altrui nel tempo di queste sensazioni. Non per altro se non per l'abito che ho contratto di dimorar quasi sempre meco stesso, e di tacere quasi tutto il tempo, e di viver tra gli uomini come isolatamente e in solitudine. (*Zibaldone* 2471,1)

> Thus I escape and scorn not only conversation, but oftentimes also the

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[23] Leopardi's profound knowledge of classical thought cannot be ignored. An excellent essay on this topic is Timpanaro's "Il Leopardi e I filosofi antichi." Timpanaro wonders why in Leopardi so few references are made to Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius with whom he clearly had spiritual affinity: "Non possiamo leggere "La Ginestra" senza pensare al *De rerum natura*." ("We cannot read 'La Ginestra' without thinking of *De rerum natura*") After having examined the influence of Greek philosophy on Leopardi, however, Timpanaro concludes: "I maestri prediletti di filosofia furono sempre per il Leopardi i materialisti e i sensisti del secolo XVIII" ("the favourite philosophical masters for Leopardi were always the materialists and the sensationalists of the XVIII century"; 228; my translation).

[24] Prior to this, the title suggested in *Epistole in versi* in 1825 was "Massime morali sull'andare del manuale di Epitteto, Rochefoucauld ec" in *Zibaldone*.2. xxvi. It is pertinent to point out what Timpanaro wrote about Leopardi's interest in Epictetus: "L'interesse per Epitteto, e per la filosofia ellenistica . . . si accord[a] realmente con una fase di disimpegno politico e di tentative di adattamento alla realtà della vita, che il Leopardi attraversò all'incirca dal 24' al '27" ("his interest in Epictetus and Hellenistic philosophy . . . intersects with a phase in his life where political apathy and attempts at adapting to the reality of life were dominant, a phase Leopardi went through roughly between 24' and '27"; 219; my translation).

concomitant presence of others when I am in this state. This is due to no other
reason than the habit I have acquired of staying on my own, and quietly living
among human beings in isolation and in solitude. (my translation)

It is important to point out, however, that Leopardi interprets Epictetus "a modo mio"
("in my own way") that is rather idiosyncratically. Indeed Leopardi both adheres and
refutes Epictetus' Stoicism. One and a half years after translating Epictetus, the Recanati
poet would already admit that Stoicism could be tedious and rather than restoring peace
to the soul, it could bring about exasperation: "Sono stanco della vita, stanco dell'
indifferenza filosofica, ch'è il solo rimedio de' mali e della noia, ma che in fine annoia
essa medesima." ("I am tired of life, tired of philosophical indifference, which is the only
remedy to existential ills and boredom, but which ultimately bores itself"; Letter to
Francesco Puccinotti, August 16, 1827, in *Epistolario* 1366; my translation).

The aspired-for serenity of ataraxia "atarassia" (see 2.1) is refuted by successive
entries in *Manuale di filosofia pratica* where the suppressed desire erupts with full-force
(see 2.3.1; 3.2). Thus, despite the centrality of Leopardi's formative readings in the
Stoics–Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi*, Cicero's concept of "tranquillitas" and readings
from Marcus Aurelius–the notion of "atarassia" (see 2.1; 3.2) proves for Leopardi to be
elusive because desire affirms its being limitless and boundless. At the heart of the
Leopardian research is the perennial tension in the "inquietudine del desiderio." The best
example of the ultimate failure of *atarassia* can be found in the concluding lines of
"Aspasia," where *atarassia* is the result of a defeat and not the state of a victorious
struggle (see 3.2).

The suspension of desire and the invitation towards "noncuranza" cannot be, for
Leopardi, a retreat into oblivion and even less a regression into the obscure zone of
passivity; it can be neither a centripetal nor a centrifugal escape from the self. The ardent
ignorance of the child and the enigmatic depth of the animalistic non-knowledge, to
which the *pastore errante* makes reference in "Canto notturno d'un pastore errante
dell'Asia," ("Night Song of a Nomadic Shepherd in Asia") are themselves sources of a
very palpable feeling. The *uomo sensibile,* according to Leopardi, needs physical, moral

and mental solitude, unknown to the sociable, mundane individual (*Zibaldone* 633,1). This methodical internal life: "contribuisce a mettere in moto l'immaginazione, a destare e pascere le illusioni, a far che l'uomo abbondi d'immagini e di deliri, e con questi facilmente faccia di meno delle opere, e basti a se stesso, e trovi piaceri in se stesso, ad accrescere la vita e l'azione interna in pregiudizio dell'esterna" ("contributes to put the imagination into action, to build and nourish illusions, to make it possible for the human being to abound in images and strong fantasy, and with these to easily do without work. In this sense one can suffice to oneself, and find pleasure in oneself, thus making life and internal action grow to the detriment of the external one"; *Zibaldone* 3676,1; my translation).

The not being-able-to-feel, however, is the worst threat the sensitive human being could face because s/he is more likely to be "disingannato profondamente e stabilmente, perché ha tutto profondamente e vivamente provato" ("profoundly and completely disenchanted, because he has tried out everything with deep and intense commitment"; *Zibaldone* 1653,2; my translation).[25] Sensitive beings are thus the most exposed to desire because they are "più sitibondi della felicità, e più inquieti dà desiderii, cioè dal desiderio della propria felicità" (" more inclined to crave happiness intensely, and more restlessly desire their own happiness"; *Zibaldone* 3835,1; my translation). And the propensity for desire coincides with the propensity for thought: "Sempre che l'uomo pensa, ei desidera, perché tanto quanto pensa ei si ama. Ed in ciascun momento, a proporzione che la sua facoltà di pensare è più libera ed intera e con minore impedimento, e che egli più pienamente ed intensamente la esercita, il suo desiderare è maggiore" ("While man thinks, he desires, because the more he thinks the more he loves himself. And in every moment, the freer is his faculty to think, the more fully and intensely he exerts it, and the

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[25] Suffering is thus necessary to break through the crystallization of indifference allowing a return to creativity that had been entirely blocked by the "rassegnata disperazione" ("resigned despair"; *Zibaldone* 2161,1; my translation). Suffering allows the human being to live *au hazard*. Despair is pitted against limited desire and hope. Despair results from an unlimited desire, which characterizes the magnanimous who are (specifically because of this reason) destined to unhappiness. As argued in 3.2, Leopardi will propose the "quiete nel patimento" ("quietude in suffering") which is evoked by the "lenta ginestra." It is a suffering that evokes the pain of the people of Antiquity, a form of consolation pregnant with *eros* and *p athos* and which offers a different form of resistance that is attained by turning the tables onto rationality. In this later poetry Leopardi needed to become a philosopher only in order to realize that his ideas were no longer Vichian but Romantic.

stronger is his desire"; *Zibaldone* 3842,2; my translation). This unlimited desire of life in the sensitive being subtends the entire "teoria del piacere."

Hence, while the teachings of Epictetus remain as a backdrop, the Leopardian analysis undercuts the attempt to isolate, negate or repress desire. Desire is upheld against the "geometria della ragione" (geometry of reason).[26] Being able to feel, and to desire, bring about compassion, that is, the ability to suffer with the other (see 3.2). Desire in Leopardi is thus placed somewhat close to the surface, away from deep-seated ruminations within the self, and while arguing for its dissolution, as Beckett will do in *Proust* (see 2.2), Leopardi also makes a strong case for its necessity (3.1; 3.2).

In this exploration, desire becomes temporally interlaced not only with the search for pleasure and the necessity of illusions, and thus expressions of hope and happiness but also despair and solitude.[27] Leopardi declares, however, the necessity of facing the impossibility of happiness. He asserts that "solo il falso, cioè l'illusione" ("only falsity, that is to say only illusions"; *Zibaldone* 315, 2; my translation) can make one's life happy. It is thus through a rigorous application of reason that the Italian poet discovers the destructive power of rationality which, in the end, turns against itself: "La vita dunque e l'assoluta mancanza d'illusione, e quindi di speranza, sono cose contraddittorie" ("Thus life and the absolute absence of illusion, and thus of hope, are contradictory"; *Zibaldone*

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[26] This does not mean that Leopardi at any point abandons reason. Sensationalism, materialism and idealism in Leopardi are linked to his loyalty to rationalism. The dialectical crux of his methodology was his way of turning reason against itself. "Il mio sistema," he wrote in the *Zibaldone*, "introduce non solo uno Scetticismo ragionato e dimostrato, ma tale che…la ragione umana per qualsivoglia progresso possibile, non potrà mai spogliarsi di questo scetticismo…e che non solo il dubbio giova a scoprire il vero…ma il vero consiste essenzialmente nel dubbio" ("My system . . . introduces not only a reasoned and proven Scepticism, but in such a manner that… human reason for whichever progress is possible, can never denude itself of this scepticism…and not only doubt helps to discover the truth . . . but truth essentially consists in doubt"; *Zibaldone* 1075-76; my translation). Rationalism in Leopardi destroys itself in discovering the irrationality of existence. The human being is bound to his rational condition and, consequently, to suffering. Passions are the new force, which result from the recognition of the inadequacy of reality and the legitimate quest for meaning.

[27] The solitude sought by the modern individual is not the same as the solitude of reflection or the search for wisdom of the people of Antiquity. In the latter, solitude safeguarded the human being's naturalness and thus his being closer to a dream-like, creative and primitive existence. Indeed, the knot that ties illusions to happiness lies in Antiquity where happiness and unhappiness were "solide e solidamente opposte fra loro" ("solid and solidly opposed one to the other"; *Zibaldone* 338,2; my translation). The solitude of the modern individual is not born out of the desire to seek *virtù*, but out of misfortune, the recurrence of which makes illusions disappear. Solitude that is regularized by method becomes autistic and brings about its own implosion.

1865; my translation). *Amor proprio* cannot survive without deluding itself. Poetry needs the imagination of the naïvely Antique but it also needs to face the truth through reason (and sentiment).[28]

In the research on desire in the posthumously-collected *Manuale* the indices become an exercise in self-analysis through observation of one's interaction with the other (see 3.2). This reveals Leopardi's early grasp of the layers of desires that are deeply rooted in the human being, paving the way for an investigation of the unconscious. For Leopardi human beings are self-divided, time-torn creatures who are incapable of coinciding with their own selves. Indeed, it is specifically in the conception of internal splitting that Leopardi is a forerunner of Freud and Lacan.[29] Leopardi, prefiguring Schopenhauer, Freud and Lacan, proposes that infinite force (which he calls *amor proprio*) that cannot but perennially desire, but which concomitantly aims at self-preservation−the ultimate attempt in such preservation being that of stilling life forever. Human beings desire even in the full knowledge that their desire is to desire in vain; an absolute desire felt "in modo così chiaro e definito" ("in a clear and definite way"; *Zibaldone* 1573,1; my translation). Lacan eerily echoes Leopardi when he speaks about the freedom to desire in vain as opposed to the impossible ataraxic model. Lacan states: "happiness is denied to whomever does not renounce the pathway of desire . . . This renunciation can be willed, but at the cost of man's truth, which is quite clear from the disapproval of those who upheld the common ideal that the Epicureans, and even the Stoics, met with. Their ataraxia deposed their wisdom" (*Écrits* 663).

Life is an infinite chain of desires, and this compels Leopardi to suggest that "l'uomo (o l'animale) non possa vivere senza desiderare, perché non può vivere

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[28] Leopardi's early poetical attempts were necessary failures to recreate naïve poetry and they were bound to become sentimental (in a Schillerian sense) compositions by their very internal mechanism. His early "canzoni" are more about a lament of the lost ideals of the past than their present absence. The later poems become sentimental specifically because, as argued below, they derive strength from the antithesis between finite and infinite. As Friedrich von Schiller would say: "The sentimental poet is…always involved with two conflicting representations …with actuality as a limit and with his idea as infinitude" (*Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* 116).

[29] Leopardian desire proves to be antithetical to the Aristotelian conception where desires are forms of intentional awareness, and therefore consciously controllable, and where the truth of rational emotions can be distinguished from the falsity of irrational ones.

senz'amarsi, e questo amore essendo infinito, non può esser mai pago" ("the human being [or the animal] cannot live without desiring, because he cannot live without self-love, and this love being infinite, cannot ever be quenched"; *Zibaldone* 1653,1; my translation).[30] Happiness is knowledge of "un sistema, un complesso, un ordine, una vita d'illusioni indipendenti, e perciò stabili: non altro" ("a system, a complex of ideas, an order, a life of independent and stable illusions: nothing else"; *Zibaldone* 633,1; my translation). A certain kind of superficiality is necessary to happiness where the human being "si getta, per così dire, alla ventura in mezzo alle cose, agli avvenimenti" ("throws himself, so to speak, in the midst of things, of events, without a plan"; *Zibaldone* 1580,1; my translation). This also implies a brave acceptance of suffering as in the "lenta ginestra" (see 3.2).

Desire when and where there is nothing to desire but pain and suffering becomes one of the definitions of the Leopardian state of *noia* (see 2.2), a sentiment that approximates Beckett's habit and boredom (2.2). According to Leopardi, the human being is almost constantly in a state of *noia* because he can never cease to desire happiness which is never truly forthcoming. For Leopardi, however, *noia* (and this is also the case with Beckett's "suffering of being"), could also denote the grandeur and aesthetic ability of human sensibility. As Leopardi states in *Pensieri*, "La noia è in qualche modo il più sublime dei sentimenti umani" ("*Noia* is in some ways the most sublime of human feelings"; LXVIII; my translation). According to this definition, *noia* seems to reconnect to Plato's aesthetic cognition of things as pure Ideas, which will later be echoed by Schopenhauer (see 1.2.2; 2.4.2), even though Leopardi ultimately refutes Platonic Ideas. The same resignation that accompanies *noia* is also experienced in Schopenhauer's tearing of the veil of mâyâ, the rupture of the *principium individuationis*, and the abandonment of the will to life (1: 280; see 2.3.2). In a passage that Beckett clearly echoes in *Proust*, but which Leopardi foreshadows in many excerpts, Schopenhauer states:

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[30] Leopardi continues to say that unhappiness is inescapable for those who search the infinite without any intermediaries or distractions. Reason needs imagination and the poet needs to also be a philosopher.

The essence of a human being consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, and strives anew, and so on and on, and in fact his happiness and well-being are nothing more than the rapid progress of this transition from desire to satisfaction and from this to a new desire, since the absence of satisfaction is suffering and the absence of a new desire is empty longing, languor, boredom. (1: 288)

This passage underlines the infinity of desire, a crucial quality for Leopardi and the psychoanalytic successors. Annihilating all forms of desire is indeed what Leopardi initially aspires to but finally refutes. Desire and the "*souffrance*" that comes with it re-flourish in a somewhat transfigured reality, which gives back intact the illusion of happiness. Only in this transfigured manner is the lightness of survival (also through humour; see 4.1) possible.[31]

The tension that characterizes Leopardian desire is thus between the infinite and the terrible sublime as opposed to the contained and the confined. The Leopardian tension implied in the "inquietudine del desiderio," is an infinite desire which also aims at infinitude and is, as in Levinas (see 1.5; 3.1), foiled by the painfully finite.[32] Nonetheless, given that nothing can escape the *hic et nunc*, one question to crop up requires our attention–from where does this tension towards that which goes beyond spatio-temporal limitations spring? Leopardi's answer is simple–the "facoltà immaginativa" ("the faculty of imagination"; *Zibaldone* 167; my translation).

The physical barrier of the "siepe" in "L'Infinito" represents the limit inherent in finite reality and the experience of such finiteness is the mechanism which triggers the imagination towards infinitude. The infinite in this case, however, is sweet and has none of the malevolence of the Sublime infinite hinted at through the presence of a malicious

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[31] The idea that the idealistic moment in Leopardi's philosophy is to be found in his poetry is put forward by Daniela Bini (12). She specifically claims: "The ideals disappear from Leopardi's late poetry and poetry itself appears as the ideal. When truth becomes the only content of poetry, the finiteness and meaninglessness bow to the creative power of man, which makes finiteness eternal and gives to meaninglessness a poetical purpose" (162). As she argues, this could prove hard to accept by anti-Crocean critics who are still suspect of idealism.

[32] Indeed in "L'Infinito", the poetic voice frees its imagination by painfully limiting its sensory perception through "l'ermo colle" in order to attempt to grasp the infinite by contrast. "L'Infinito" represents the pure mental mechanism functioning through antithesis, consciously recreating the dialectical movement of life.

universe in the last poem "La Ginestra" (see 3.2). In this last poem, less than abandonment to the infinite, the infinitely sublime surroundings are now of real matter and no longer simply related to the imagination.[33] In "La Ginestra," through the power of reason, the human being has unveiled nature in her sublime senselessness and longs for that same sense of the sublime.[34] In "La Ginestra," from the frail, finite matter of one's being thought springs out in all its imaginative power, proving its nobility by placing itself in the engulfing incomprehensibility of its existence. It is within its incomprehensibility that, as is the case with the Levinasian desire discussed at the end of this chapter, it reaches out to the other.[35]

1.2.2 From Leopardian Desire to Schopenhauerian Will

The Leopardian notion of desire is taken up by Schopenhauer pointing forward to Freud's reflections on the unconscious. Schopenhauer specifically praises Leopardi:

> no one has treated this subject [human desolation] so thoroughly and exhaustively as Leopardi in our own day. He is entirely imbued and penetrated with it; everywhere his theme is the mockery and wretchedness of this existence. He presents it on every page of his works, yet in such a multiplicity of forms and applications, with such a wealth of imagery, that he never wearies us, but, on the

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[33] In many passages in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi stated that the infinity for which our soul strives is not an intellectual or spiritual entity but a physical one. Leopardi could sense that the contradiction lay in the dialectical essence of our nature. The desire for pleasure is a sign of our being part of nature (our physicality), whereas the need for infinity derives from the rational part of our being.

[34] Edmund Burke's essay "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" was in Leopardi's library in the Italian translation, published in 1804 (see Bini; 155). An excellent study of the influence of the English thinkers in Leopardi's concept of the Sublime is to be found in Perella's *Night and the Sublime in Giacomo Leopardi*.

[35] It is important to point out that the desire for the other in Leopardi does not imply transferring one's desire onto another subject because that would bring about moral death and in Leopardi the acceptance of the impossibility of happiness finds its scope in *Beneficenza* (*Zibaldone* 614, 2). The other is a limited human being and it is that same limit that channels the moral sensation of desire of the infinite. Concomitantly, however, the desire of the infinite, the desire of the absolute, typical of magnanimous subjects, requires illusions and dreams. This Romantic message annuls the Stoic teachings about control and limit. (It has to be stated, however, that in spite of what could be termed as his Romantic spirit, Leopardi repeatedly attacked Romantic writers. See *Zibaldone* 191,3 and also his essay "Discorso di un italiano sopra la poesia romantica").

contrary, has a diverting and stimulating effect. (*The World as Will and Representation* 2: XLVI).[36]

In the period that spans from Schopenhauer to Freud the great project of Enlightenment runs aground on an obdurate core of desire (struggling against Will, as Schopenhauer would term it), which throws it alarmingly out of kilter. What appears as an already suspicious desire in Leopardi, becomes in Schopenhauer's hands the blind, insatiably hankering Will which, like desire for Leopardi, is witnessed in the self and the world as embodied striving driven by lack: "desire lasts a long time and demands go on forever; fulfilment is brief and sparsely meted out. But even final satisfaction itself is only illusory." (*World as Will and Representation* 1:219)

The world manifests itself to experience as a multiplicity of individual objects−Schopenhauer calls this the objectivation of the will. The form of all cognition is the principle of sufficient reason, or the "*principium individuationis*" (1: 137).[37] Schopenhauer associates the "levels of the will's objectivation" to Plato's Ideas which are "always being and never becoming" (1: 154-55). The will finds in the human being, as (Platonic) Idea, "its clearest and most perfect objectivation," (1: 178). In a passage that Beckett clearly echoes in *Proust*, and that Leopardi equally clearly foreshadows, Schopenhauer describes human endeavour and desire as follows: [38]

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[36] In a note to his translation of "History in the Service and Disservice of Life," the second of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Unmodern Observations* (otherwise translated as *Untimely Meditations*)*,* Gary Brown writes: "Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer, felt intense admiration [for Leopardi's poetry and prose]. Schopenhauer had seen in Leopardi the supreme contemporary poet of human unhappiness, and it was to Nietzsche . . . that Hans von Bulow . . . dedicated his translation of Leopardi into German . . . Of Leopardi Nietzsche remarked [in "We Classicists," the last of the *Unmodern Observations*] that he was 'the modern ideal of a classicist' and one of 'the last great followers of the Italian poet-scholars' ["Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," the fourth of the *Unmodern Observations*] . . . who, along with Merimée, Emerson, and Landor, could rightly be called 'a master of prose' [*The Gay Science* 92]." (93*n*-94*n*). See 2.4.

[37] The will as thing in itself lies outside the province of the principle of sufficient reason, although each of its appearances is entirely subject to this principle since it conditions the general form of all appearance; and human activities, like all other appearances, must be subject to it.

[38] As to the invisible chord of sympathy between Beckett and Schopenhauer, the latter has long been recognized by criticism: "Beckett had a 'sensed affinity' with Schopenhauer; consequently emphasized the latter's pessimism, artistic views and the role of the will" (Feldman, "Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 190).

Always delud[ing] us into believing that their fulfilment is the final goal of willing; but as soon as they are attained they no longer look the same and thus are soon forgotten, grow antiquated and are really, if not admittedly, always laid to the side as vanished delusions; we are lucky enough when there is still something left to desire and strive after, to carry on the game of constantly passing from desire to satisfaction and from this to a new desire, a game whose rapid course is called happiness and slow course is called suffering, so that the game might not come to an end, showing itself to be fearful, life-destroying boredom, a wearied longing without a definite object, a deadening languor. (1: 188-89)

The world as 'will' can either be considered with respect to its affirmation or negation. The negation of the will and the role of art in this negation (see 2.3.2), [39] which is clearly prefigured by Leopardi's *atarassia* tinged by *souffrance* and pre-announces Beckett's suffering of being (see 2.1), still proves elusive to complete will-lessness and desirelessness (see 2.3.2). [40]

In a clear foreshadowing of Freud, and an echo of the *Eros-Thanatos* dilemma at the heart of Leopardian poetics, Schopenhauer explains that the drive to reproduce is the most fundamental expression of the affirmation of the will to life: " [the] ultimate purpose; the highest goal of life in the natural human being, as it is in the animal" (1:

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[39] The goal of art is "to arouse cognition of these Ideas through the presentation of particular things . . .– something that is possible only given a corresponding alteration in the subject of cognition" (1: 285). Schopenhauer insists: "the objective side of aesthetic spectatorship, the intuitive apprehension of the Platonic Idea always occurs simultaneously with and as a necessary correlate to this subjective side" (1: 223).

[40] Negation of the will is, according to Schopenhauer, directly related to the feeling of the Burkean Sublime, as is also one of the definitions Leopardi gives of *noia* (also see 1.2.1; 2.1; 3.2). Schopenhauer explains the difference between the beautiful and the sublime as follows: "what distinguishes the feeling of the sublime from the feeling of the beautiful is this: with the beautiful, pure cognition has won the upper hand without a struggle . . . With the sublime, on the other hand, that state of pure cognition is gained only by means of a conscious and violent tearing free from relationships between the same object and the will (relationships that are recognized as unfavourable) by means of a free and conscious elevation over the will and the cognition relating to it. This elevation must not only be achieved consciously, it must also be sustained and is therefore accompanied by a constant recollection of the will, although not of a particular, individual willing, such as fear or desire, but rather of human willing in general, to the extent that it is universally expressed through its objecthood, the human body" (1: 226). If the world as representation is the visibility of the will, then art is the clarification of this visibility. The thought of Schopenhauer on Will and desire and its relation to art is inherited by Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly in the early work *The Birth of Tragedy*. (see 2.4)

356). On the other hand, however, "from the same source . . . ultimately emerges also what I call the negation of the will to life" (1: 405). The latter is central to Asceticism, by which Schopenhauer understands the "deliberate breaking of the will by forgoing what is pleasant and seeking what is unpleasant" (1: 419). This disquieting dichotomy between the will to life and the negation of this will becomes crucial in Freudian drives discussed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

1.3   Freudian Desire

The Freudian concept of desire (a non-Freudian term which owes considerably to the Leopardi-Schopenhauer-[Nietzsche, see 2.4] lineage) revolves around a subject whose identity is fixed in Oedipal repressions.[41] Freudian desire is thus once more formulated in terms of loss. From Freud's earliest works, particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it is laid down as a rule that the expression of desire must be sought in a dream and thus in the unconscious. Lacan (whose notion of desire, as argued below, builds considerably on Freud's) amplifies on how the dream has the structure of a rebus– that is, a form of writing (*Écrits* 221; 424): [42]

> Does it mean nothing that Freud recognized desire in dreams?. . .we must read *The Interpretation of Dreams* to know what is meant by what Freud calls 'desire' there…What we must keep in mind here is that this desire is articulated in a very cunning discourse. (*Écrits* 620)

Lacan, however, also points out that it is "in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that the root of desire in the unconscious is demonstrated [by Freud] in all its subtlety" (*Écrits* 223; see 4.4).

Freud goes back to Plato's *Symposium* (see 1.2), albeit in a complete inversion of the Platonic search for a transcendent ideal, in order to explain the inner human struggle

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[41] Lacan says: "Castration is the altogether new mainspring Freud introduced into desire, giving desire's lack the meaning that remained enigmatic in Socrates' dialectic" (*Écrits* 723).

[42] Although Lacan is greatly interested in Freud's early discoveries–the Unconscious, transference, the sexual life of children–that are so fundamental for Lacanian thought, Lacan also draws on Freud's later texts where Freud sought to write his insights into a stable psychoanalytic system. A Work like *The Ego and the Id* is, in many ways, the foil for the early Lacan in essays such as the "Mirror Stage."

of desire. Variations of desire as wanting traverse Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which condenses the Freudian 'wish' and 'drive' (*Trieb*), the latter crucially different from instinct.[43] The Freudian drive implies that which is impossible to fulfil in its very naming.[44] Significantly, however, the drive, a motivation tracing the human need for satisfaction, becomes, in (Lacanian) desire, a motivation tracing a human need for signification. As Zupancic points out, an important and eloquent distinction divides desire and drive:

> Desire sustains itself by remaining unsatisfied. As for the drive, the fact that it 'understands that this is not the way it will be satisfied' does not stop it from finding satisfaction 'elsewhere'. Thus, in contrast to desire, the drive sustains itself on the very fact that it is satisfied. (242)

Freud formulates the conflict between the search for the irreducible origin of human desire and the realization of its lack in the struggle between life and death drives, or what Gavriel Reisner terms desire versus anti-desire (see introduction; 1.4.2; 4.3). Freud pits internal forces tending towards self-assertion on the one hand, against forces of self-preservation: "an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or another departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 45). Ego-forces are primarily equated with the death drive, and sexual forces tally with life (52). The pleasure principle is thus in the midst of, on the one hand, reactionary, regressive forces whose compulsion to repeat mask the ultimate attempt at self-preservation–self-annihilation–expressed through the death-drive. On the other hand, the pleasure principle is fought for by the equally forceful life-forces (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 52). Freud describes the process of the death-drive, what could be construed as conceptually close to the Lacanian Imaginary demand (see 1.4.2), or what we have termed 'the desire not to desire'

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[43] Lacan explains: "instinct . . . is defined as a kind of [experiential] knowledge we admire because it cannot become knowledge. But in Freud's work something quite different is at stake, which is a *savoir* certainly, but one that doesn't involve the slightest *connaissance*, in that it is inscribed in a discourse of which the subject . . . knows neither the meaning nor the text" (*Écrits* 680).

[44] Lacan's elusive descriptions foreground the transformations of desire as an elusive power: "it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable" (*Écrits* 681). Lacan states: "Freudianism hews a desire, the crux of which is essentially found in impossibilities" (*Écrits* 722).

in precise terms: "the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the 'Nirvana principle' to borrow a term from Barbara Low [1920, 73])—a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle" (*Beyond The Pleasure Principle* 67). Once more this description cannot but remind us of Leopardi's *atarassia* and Beckett's "suffering of being" (see 2.1). *Amor proprio* in Leopardi is thus, as Antonio Prete insists, not in contradiction with desire as a quest that struggles at the heart of Freudian drives (17). This discussion also unwittingly steers our course back into Schopenhauer's harbour and Freud himself will quote Schopenhauer's phrase that death is the "true result and to that extent the purpose of life," while the sexual drive is the embodiment of the will to live" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 59-60). The struggle between life and death drives is exposed most compellingly in the fragments of the narratives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

There are five narrative fragments: four narratives of return are aligned against a single narrative of advance. The narratives of return include the embracing-again of original pain. These regressive stories activate what Lacan will term the Imaginary in narrative enactments of the death drive (again echoing Leopardi's *atarassia*) and they are all about the desire to return to an absence. The motivating force of the return is unconscious fear of desire as an infinite, self-regenerative force (desire).

This anti-desire/desire conflict, an absence in presence, is palpable in the discovery of the *fort/da* game described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the symbolic presence of words is inextricably bound with an absence. As in Leopardi, whereby the emphasis in desire is not on the object desired but the sense of loss of what is no more, the same oscillation experienced in desiring what is no longer can be grafted onto desire of the sheer sense of nothingness as opposed to desire of the infinite: "L'orrore e il timore che l'uomo ha, per una parte, del nulla, per l'altra, dell'eterno" ("the horror and fear that the human being experiences, on the one hand, of nothingness, on the other, of the eternal"; *Zibaldone* 644,1; my translation).

Leopardi's combative poetic voices struggling to voice suffering through a cleaved subjectivity, as well as Beckett's attitude toward contemporary art where there is "nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues* 103), can be placed in the context of Lacan's understanding of Freudian discoveries on desire and language as interlaced with the unconscious. As the French psychoanalyst states: "By taking one's bearings from the joint between the consequences of language and the desire for knowledge–a joint that the subject is–perhaps the paths will become more passable regarding what has always been known about the distance that separates the subject from his existence as a sexed being, not to mention as a living being" (*Écrits* 195).

1.4 Lacanian Desire

Lacan's desire, oriented in a field of language and the Law, and ordered in relation to the function of speech in its different forms (also in relation to slips, witticism and jokes, see 4.4), can be seen as pivotal in Leopardi's tormented poetic voices and Beckett's dramatic characters who are ultimately prevented from attaining a reconciliation with their speech.[45] In what echoes the Leopardian notion of desire superimposed on Freud's second topography id-ego-superego, Lacan locates in the ego "[what] was already glimpsed by the traditional moralists, who called it *amour-propre*" (*Écrits* 355), only to

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[45] According to the French psychoanalyst desire and language persistently return to a scene wherein conscious intentionality gives way to unconscious drives. The coexistence of desires and one's ethical being create a split consciousness. The Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real orders of being can offer an explanation to the role of desire. In what is called the Mirror Stage, the Lacanian subject is split into "*moi*" and "*je*". The "*moi*", emerges from two stages: the pre-mirror and the mirror stage. In the pre-mirror stage the infant identifies with the external world and has a fragmented body-Image. The mirror stage is characterized by the infant's identification with the primary caregiver. This is what Lacan refers to as the "transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (*Écrits* 76). The child now takes this perception of the (m)other as a reflection of her/himself. The infant therefore assumes an image based on a false recognition which situates "the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual" (*Écrits* 76). The Infant's sense of being a unified self is thus based on the other with a lower case o, within the Imaginary Order. Language designates the period of the post-mirror stage, the child's transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order. The mother as the primordial object of desire is now repressed to the infant's unconscious. The object of its gratification is forbidden and the subject is hollowed by this prohibition into the perpetual non-being or "*manqué d'être*" we know as desire. At this point, the principal agent of the Symbolic Order, the "Name-of-the-Father", is introduced as an Imperative to the child, the Other with a capital O. Language is therefore identified as negation: "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" (*Écrits* 10).

assert the crucial rupture within that ego in its relation to one's own body image, linking all objects of one's desires to the other's desire.

1.4.1 The Freudian Model in Lacan

The Freudian drive already enfolds an absence, which only becomes a readable presence in enunciation. Starting with Freud, the unconscious becomes a chain of signifiers that insists on interfering in the cuts offered by actual discourse. The most significant cut is the one that constitutes a bar between the signifier and the signified.[46] Lacan says:

> Following in Freud's footsteps, I teach that the Other is the locus of the kind of memory he discovered by the name "unconscious," memory that he regards as the object of a question that has remained unanswered, insofar as it conditions the indestructibility of certain desires. I will answer this question with the conception of the signifying chain, inasmuch as—once this chain has been inaugurated by primordial symbolization (made manifest in the *Fort*! *Da*! Game, which Freud elucidated as lying at the origin of repetition automatism)—it develops in accordance with logical connections whose hold on that which is to be signified, namely, the being of entities, is exerted through the signifying effects I describe as metaphor and metonymy. (*Écrits* 479)

It is in the same vocalic connotation of presence and absence, the very foundations of Freud's doctrine intuited in the *Fort/Da* game, that Lacan designates the discovery of the linguistic phoneme. Lacan writes:

> Through the word—already a presence made of absence—absence itself comes to be named in an original moment whose perpetual recreation Freud's genius detected in a child's game. And from this articulated couple of presence and

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[46]Language, says Lacan, is a concatenation of signifiers, "the signifier . . . [being] a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence" (*Écrits* 10). The signifier reigns in that "the unconscious is the fact that man is inhabited by the signifier" (*Écrits* 25).

absence . . . a language's world of meaning is born, in which the world of things will situate itself. (*Écrits* 228)

Lacan will amplify the absence-presence dyad in the context of the Freudian theory of condensation and displacement grafted onto the metaphor-metonymy axes unravelled by "playing on the multiple staves of the score that speech constitutes in the registers of language" (*Écrits* 241).[47] This theory articulates what links metaphor to the question of being and metonymy to its lack.[48] Desire is caught in metonymy, "eternally extending toward the desire for something else" (*Écrits* 431).

The moment of the speaking I's entrance into socially elaborated situations, "decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other's desire" (Lacan, *Écrits* 79). This moment reproposes the Freudian death-life struggle and is characterized by "primary narcissism" (Lacan, *Écrits* 79), on the one side, and the alienating I function, on the other. But since the signifier is only a veil of the Other's desire, it is the latter that the subject is required to recognize, that is the fact that he or she is a subject divided by the signifying splitting.[49] Terry Eagleton explains it as follows:

> Desire is nothing personal. . . it is an affliction that was lying in wait for us from the outset, a tragic scenario which we inherit from our elders, a disfiguring medium into which we are plunged at birth. It is the 'object in the subject' which makes us what we are, an alien wedge at the core of our being . . . (143)

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[47] Lacan says: "The form of mathematicization in which the discovery of the *phoneme* is inscribed, as a function of pairs of oppositions formed by the smallest graspable discriminative semantic elements, leads us to the very foundations that Freud's final doctrine designates as the subjective sources of the symbolic function in a vocalic connotation of presence and absence" (*Écrits* 235).

[48] Lacan says, "'condensation' is the superimposed structure of signifiers in which metaphor finds its field; its name . . . shows the mechanism's connaturality with poetry . . . 'displacement'−this transfer of signification that metonymy displays . . . is presented, right from its first appearance in Freud's work, as the unconscious' best means by which to foil censorship" (*Écrits* 425). He continues to say, "This signifying game of metonymy and metaphor−. . . links my fate to the question of my destiny−this game is played, in its exorable subtlety, until the match is over, where I am not because I cannot situate myself there" (*Écrits* 430).

[49] The resultant lack-of-being contradicts the philosophy of being which concentrates on the conception of the self-sufficiency of consciousness. Lacan's dichotomy is thus against, "the ego as centred on the *perception-consciousness* system or as organized by the 'reality principle.'" On the contrary, Lacan professes "to take as our point of departure the *function of misrecognition* that characterizes the ego" (*Écrits* 80).

To be true to one's desire is a fidelity to failure, since desire is an infinity which looms up in negative guise in the individual's persistent failure to be gratified and in "signification [that] can be sustained . . . by reference to another signification" (*Écrits* 415). Such de-centering of the subject will become central in the discussion of the Leopardian poetic voices and Beckett's dramatic characters' utterances in chapter three. In chapter four this de-centering of the subject becomes crucial with relation to humour and the death-life drives at its kernel, or what Lacan terms, "the frivolity of jokes–the specific joy of which, as Freud shows us on the basis of his technique, stems from the fact that they make us share the dominance of the signifier" (*Écrits* 372; see 4.4).

1.4.2 Lacanian Demand and Desire: Anti-Desire and Desire

Lacan makes important distinctions when he pits desire to what he terms 'demand' and 'need'. The difference between demand and desire (Reisner's anti-desire against desire) is pivotal in the articulation of language. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan very succinctly defines demand as follows:

> In yet another turn of phrase, Lacan named demand "the metonymy of Desire."
> All demand is an appeal for love and recognition from the Other (A). But demand
> is doomed to repeat itself in a circuitous manner because the Other's Desire is
> alien, solitary and insatiable, a condition of absoluteness and detachment. (86)

Desire is thus the Symbolic counterpart to Imaginary demand and Real need. But this demand for unity in, and by, the other can never be satisfied. Demand falls short of need:

> . . . it is in the oldest demand that primary identification is produced, the one that
> occurs on the basis of the mother's omnipotence—namely, the one that not only
> makes the satisfaction of needs dependent upon the signifying apparatus, but also
> that fragments, filters and models those needs in the defiles of the signifier's
> structure. Needs become subordinate to the same conventional conditions as does
> the signifier in its double register… (*Écrits* 517)

Desire thus emerges in the realization that needs and demands are not the same thing. In the Symbolic, comes the association of this impossible demand with the unconditional love desired represented by complete unity−that is, by a return to the Real.[50] Lacan refers to this unconditional love as the *objet petit a*, defining it as "the absolute condition of desire" (*Écrits* 571). The past object that desire seeks, the *objet petit a*, is introduced by the impossibility of satisfaction.[51] Desire emerges in the gap between demand and need (as the failure of demand to meet itself). Lacan explains:

> For the unconditionality of demand, desire substitutes the "absolute" condition: this condition in fact dissolves the element in the proof of love that rebels against the satisfaction of need. This is why desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting. (*Écrits* 580)

Desire is the failure of demand to articulate itself in the Symbolic. It is the signifier that fails to articulate the signified. Demand is displaced by desire as the Symbolic "*je*" struggles against "*moi*." Desire is that which fills the gap between the need for instinctual enjoyment and the demand that this need be filled by the (m)other. But in this, desire is always already determined by the Other. The cleavage between "*moi*" and the "*je*," demand and desire is there to remain: ". . . the *moi* is the enemy of Desire. Desire, on the other hand, is insatiable and infinite" (Ragland-Sullivan 60). The *moi*'s desire is thus more akin to Imaginary anti-desire, the desire to cease desiring, the regressive move of Freudian death drive and Leopardi's *atarassia*. The desire for recognition, on the other

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[50] Introducing the phallus as the privileged signifier serving the function of signifying the lack of being, that by which "the Ancients embodied therein the *Nous* and the Logos" (*Écrits* 584), Lacan says: "The demand for love can only suffer from a desire whose signifier is foreign to it. If the mother's desire *is* for the phallus, the child wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy her desire. Thus the division immanent in desire already makes itself felt by virtue of being experienced in the Other's desire, in that this division already stands in the way of the subject being satisfied with presenting to the Other the real [organ] he may *have* that corresponds to the phallus; for what he has is no better than what he does not have, from the point of view of his demand for love, which would like him to be the phallus" (*Écrits* 582*).*

[51] In *Seminar VII* Lacan explains: "In daring to formulate a satisfaction that isn't rewarded with a repression, the theme that is central or preeminent is, what is desire? . . . realizing one's desire is necessarily always raised from the point of view of an absolute condition. It is precisely to the extent that the demand always under−or overshoots itself that, because it articulates itself through the signifier, it always demands something else . . . that the desire is formed as something supporting this metonymy, namely, as something the demand means beyond whatever it is able to formulate." (*Seminar VII* 294)

hand, is the desire to be desired, itself linked to the desire to be a unity. Thus while demand is for and because of the other, desire is for and through the other. And as the Other is an ideal that can never be attained, desire will always remain unfulfilled.

I argue that the Symbolic struggling against the dominant image of the Imaginary−the clash between desire and demand−proliferates in the chosen Beckettian plays as in the Leopardian poetic voices with the introduction of the O/other. In chapter three the founding moment of subjectivity in the Leopardian and Beckettian presentation of the desire of the O/other will be discussed (in comparison to the Levinasian notion) by revisiting Lacan's "Mirror Stage," "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," and "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis."

1.5   Levinas and the Desire of the Other

Levinas' concepts of desire evolve in stages. *Time and the Other*, where Levinas is still deeply phenomenological in method, introduces the basic premise that the subject is constituted in the intervention of the Other.[52] In this early work, to which I refer in the analysis of *Happy Days* in 3.4, the epitome of alterity and otherness, as it will partially be the case for Leopardi in, for instance, "Alla sua donna," is the feminine (3.2). In *Totality and Infinity* the notion of desire is taken into the choppy domain of ethics.[53] Levinas's discussion of subjectivity takes the form of an attack on totality, which he posits against a redefined notion of a prophetic ethical 'metaphysics.'[54] *Otherwise Than Being* further abstracts and theorizes the primacy of the ethical approach. In this section I discuss

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[52] In *Time and the Other*, time is that which constitutes the subject in its inter-subjectivity. The structure of the subject as "by" the other (though not yet "for" the other) is set out and the relation with the other person is construed as the starting point in the subject's attempt to overcome the limits of death.

[53] The central term "infinity," is explicitly borrowed from Descartes' *Meditations*, where it referred to the divine−which "dazzled" the Cartesian ego. Levinas explains: "For the Cartesian *cogito* is discovered, at the end of the *Third Meditation*, to be supported on the certitude of the divine existence qua infinite, by relation to which the finitude of the *cogito*, or the doubt, is posited and conceivable. This finitude could not be determined without recourse to the infinite, as is the case in the moderns, for whom finitude is, for example, determined on the basis of the mortality of the subject" (*TI* 210). Descartes, says Levinas, "discovers a relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority, which nevertheless does not do violence to interiority−a receptivity without passivity, a relation between freedoms" (*TI* 211).

[54] What I mean by prophetic in this context is that Levinas's work comes out of a tradition of Judaic thought that takes seriously the social voice of the Hebrew prophets. On more than one count, in the background of Levinas's vision, particularly in his last works, is the attempt to voice the original call to goodness of God's commandments. Clearly, I do not take my argument this far.

Levinas' conceptions of need, desire, *eros* and related topics in *Time and the Other* (1946-47), *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), themes that project their shadows on each other.

1.5.1 Metaphysical Desire versus Need

The distinction between desire and need is central to Levinas: "desire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates . . . need is a void of the Soul; it proceeds from the subject" (*Totality and Infinity* 62). Need indicates the insufficiency of the needy. Need, however, is not simply lack because "the human being thrives on his needs" (*TI* 114).

In Platonic terms, need is not the heavenly Eros but the vulgar Venus (*TI* 114). The satisfaction of need for Levinas has no relationship to the divine. This in spite of the fact that metaphysics is mostly built on a structure of need in a quest to reunite the same with the other. Until union has been attained, there is disquietude as nostalgia (*TI* 102). In Plato's philosophy, Levinas finds, "the Good [that] is Good in itself and not by relation to the need to which it is wanting" (*TI* 102-03).

Desire in Levinas is thus for that which transcends the 'I.' It is metaphysical desire that "tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other" (*TI* 33). Metaphysical desire is "desire [that] does not coincide with an unsatisfied need; it is situated beyond satisfaction and non-satisfaction. The relationship with the Other, or the idea of Infinity, accomplishes it" (*TI* 179). In Leopardi's "La Ginestra" and Beckett's *Endgame* and *Happy Days* I argue that the individual is, through the presence of the bruising strangeness of the other, confronted with the Sublime Infinite as an overwhelming force, and as in Levinas, the individual is challenged to redirect desire towards the other person.[55]

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[55] The Sublime infinite in "L'Infinito" is ultimately sweet and positive but the Universe and the Sublime Infinite hinted at through that universe in "La Ginestra" are negative. On the Sublime in Leopardi, Daniela Bini says the following: "The idea of infinity, as a source of sublime, that emerges from Burke's passages is of an irrational type, which can be found only in Leopardi's early phase. 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear,' wrote Burke. It is difficult to imagine the poet of "La Ginestra" to agree with such a statement…in Leopardi's sublime there is a component of pain, but it is of a metaphysical type. It is the suffering of a soul who sees the evil of reality through the eyes of reason. … The feeling of pain in Leopardi is a consequence of an act of reason, whereas in Burke it is the means

1.5.2 Metaphysical Desire, Transcendence, Infinity and Height

Metaphysical desire is thus instigated by the non- in-difference of one to another. Levinas explains: "the transcendence of the Other . . . accounts for freedom" (*TI* 225). This transcendence is, once again, manifested positively: "passing over to being's other, otherwise than being" (*OTB* 3).[56] It is separation with regard to the Infinite: "Desire which does not arise from a lack or a limitation but from a surplus, from the idea of Infinity" (*TI* 210). [57]

This relation is already fixed in the situation described by Descartes, and quoted by Levinas, where "the 'I think' maintains with the Infinite it can nowise contain and from which it is separated a relation called 'idea of infinity'" (*TI* 48). Levinas states: ". . . infinity overflows the thought that thinks it" (*TI* 25).[58] The idea of infinity revealed, but

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which keeps reason away" (157). This argument is opposed by a number of critics most prominently by Bortolo Martinelli in his 2003 book *Leopardi; Tra Leibniz e Locke*.

[56] Transcendence has multiple meanings in Levinas. A transcendental phenomenology, for instance, is characterized by sensation and by things encountered in the light. The light that makes a thing appear, however, drives out the shadows and thus empties space. Thus a thing is encountered in the light as much as the thing is encountered in nothingness. For Levinas to comprehend a particular being is "to apprehend it out of an illuminated site it does not fill" (*Totality and Infinity* 190). Indeed in driving out darkness, the light does not arrest the incessant play of what he calls the *there is* (see 2.5). Yet vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of the *there is* (see 2.5). This deliverance from the horror of the *there is* is evinced in the contentment of enjoyment. Levinas, however, emphasizes, "Vision is not a transcendence. It ascribes a signification by the relation it makes possible . . . Light conditions the relations between data; it makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face . . . Vision is a forgetting of the *there is* because of the essential satisfaction, the agreeableness of sensibility, enjoyment, contentment with the finite without concern for the infinite" (*TI* 191). The transcendence I will be interested in, particularly in the analysis of *Endgame*, is described by Levinas: "If the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness preeminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts across the vision of forms and can be stated neither in terms of contemplation nor in terms of practice. It is the face; its revelation is speech" (*TI* 193).

[57] Levinas explains: "The Infinite then cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter. The trace left by the infinite is not the residue of a presence; its very glow is ambiguous. Otherwise, its positivity would not preserve the infinity of the infinite any more than negativity would" (*OTB* 12).

[58] Descartes comes in once more whereby, as Levinas states, "The knowing of the *cogito* thus refers to a relation with the Master−with the idea of infinity or of the Perfect. The idea of Infinity is neither the immanence of the *I think* nor the transcendence of the object." The movement of the Cartesian *cogito* is a movement of descent toward the ever more profound abyss of the "*there is*" (see 2.6). Levinas says that Descartes in this manner enters into a work of infinite negation which is "a movement unto the abyss, vertiginously sweeping along the subject incapable of stopping itself" (*TI* 93). Levinas says that the 'I' in negativity breaks with participation but it does not find in the *cogito* a stopping place. Descartes, according to Levinas, "gauge[s] in advance the return of affirmation behind the negation" (*TI* 93). What Levinas adds, however, to this Cartesian thought is that "to possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the

not disclosed, through the other person who is Other is argued for in "La Ginestra," *Endgame* and *Happy Days* (see 3.2; 3.3; 3.4).

Once it recognizes its material needs, the 'I' can turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, and opens to desire. This requires discourse antecedent to which is the other's 'Height' (see 3.3). The Other is the poor one who presents him or herself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty is paradoxically also a commandment (and thus the idea of Height): "The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement−glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom" (*TI* 251). Levinas explains: "This command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command. The *thou* is posited in front of a *we* (*TI* 213). In "La Ginestra", the *thou* is posited in the appeal to form a social chain against the far too powerful surrounding Nature. In *Endgame* and *Happy Days* this power lies in the overwhelmingly confined setting of the dark basement and the sucking mound respectively, the latter blocking Winnie who can "no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise" (*CDW* 160). I argue that in all three situations, the presence of the other person has bound the self before it can enter into any contractual system of language and exchange. I argue that the self is, in these literary works, always already for-the-other. The poetic voice's appeal to reach out to the other in "La Ginestra" and the presence of Hamm, Nagg and Willie as Other could be construed as coming from a dimension of height, albeit without opposing the 'I' as obstacle or enemy; without an attempt to 'totalize' the other.

Other" (*TI* 93). It is the other who can offer that stopping place for the *cogito*. Levinas explains: "In returning to the Cartesian notion of infinity, the "idea of infinity" put in the separated being by the infinite, we retain its positivity, its anteriority to every finite thought and every thought of the finite" (*TI* 197).

1.5.3 Totality

'Totality' in Levinas expresses the mode of depriving the being of its alterity.[59] Levinas explains that 'Totality' is usually achieved through, "A third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being. . . It may appear as Being distinguished from the existent . . . the light in which existents become intelligible. To theory as comprehension of beings the general title ontology is appropriate" (TI 42).

In chapter three I argue that Winnie (but also Clov) are initially neutralized as an object appearing by taking their place in the light (see 3.3; 3.4). The neutralization in the light is equivalent to being reduced to same: "To broach an existent from Being is simultaneously to let it be and to comprehend it . . . – wholly light and phosphorescence" (*TI* 45). Clearly Levinas is countering Martin Heidegger's philosophy, particularly the Heideggerian theses professed in *Being and Time* (see 2.5; 3.1).[60] Levinas rebuts that the relation with the Other cannot be subordinated to ontology: "In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics" (*TI* 45).

1.5.4 The Ethics of the face-to-face and The Rupture of Subjectivity: Alterity

Levinas calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology through the ethical encounter found in the face-to-face. The discussion of the face does not revolve around the materiality of skin or features, but it is more the "epiphany" (*TI* 262) of the face that denudes a principle: "we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a

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[59] Alterity is the unidentifiable. Its sense is the unilateral direction of an approach, caught in a being ordered. The structure of the experience of alterity can be expressed in terms of temporality, which is the internal format of subjectivity. The openness by which subjectivity opens to things is itself opened by the internal scission of the instant of its presence, the internal movement of its moment whereby it does not hold itself together in utter identity, but splits, gets out of phase with itself, and clings to itself despite this fission. This creates a gaping open of itself and a clinging on to itself. The present instant is extended by a past which it cannot catch up with or coincide with or represent.

[60] In *Otherwise Than Being* he says: "Phenomenality, the exhibition of being's essence in truth, is a permanent presupposition of the philosophical tradition of the West" (132). It is specifically this notion that he attacks in this work (see 2.5).

situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other" (*TI* 24).

The primordial expression in the face of the Other states: "you shall not commit murder" (*TI* 199). The infinite gleams in the face of the Other, "in the total nudity of his defenseless eyes" (*TI* 199).[61] Here Levinas' thought represents a return to what is ultimately central to Leopardian ethics, and which imbues Beckett's drama, namely the emphasis on the weak, needy, afflicted human body that calls out for compassion.

As mentioned above, Levinas reacts to Heidegger's notion of subjectivity as a function of Being (see 2.5): "subjectivity, consciousness, the ego presuppose *Dasein*, which belongs to essence" (*OTB* 17). Levinas insists on the beyond 'essence,' the "otherwise than being" (*OTB* 18), expressed as infinity. The subject, in what we refer to below as 'Saying,' is presented as a sensibility. Subjectivity in Levinas thus becomes structured as responsibility and has an antecedent and autonomous structure.[62] It is in the incarnation of consciousness that subjectivity is exposed to the exterior and committed to alterity.[63] In "La Ginestra," *Endgame* and *Happy Days* the protagonists, obliged and thus subjected with regard to the neighbour, are the breaking-point but also the binding place, where, 'essence' is exceeded by the infinite. In its being, subjectivity thus undoes

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[61] The discussion about the eyes will be dealt with in the analysis of *Endgame* where the resistance through the eyes is the ethical resistance which gauges the temptation to 'totalize' the other and in reaction opens up to the infinite. This, I argue, is the notion of Infinity in the background of *Endgame*, an infinity that counters the notion of nothingness.

[62] Levinas states "Subjectivity of flesh and blood in matter– the signifyingness of sensibility, the-one-for-the-other itself– is the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives . . . diachrony of sensibility, which cannot be assembled in a representational present, refers to an irrecuperable pre-ontological past, that of maternity." (*OTB* 78). In Levinas' early work, fecundity is crucial: "a personal relation, though it be not given to the "I" as a possibility" (*TI* 57). Fecundity is, "the movement of the lover before this frailty of femininity, neither pure compassion nor impassiveness, indulges in compassion, is absorbed in the complacence of the caress" (*TI* 257). The notion of the 'caress,' which Levinas describes as that which "transcends the sensible . . . the desire that animates it is reborn in its satisfaction, fed somehow by what *is not yet*" (*TI* 257-58), becomes particularly determining, together with the notion of the maternal, in my reading of *Happy Days*. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas abstracts the relation between the I and the Other and rather than fecundity and the erotic, the emphasis is on the 'I' desiring what it does not lack through the Other's approach. The notion of the maternal is still, however, umbilical. Where in *Totality and Infinity* the feminine stood as a testament to the other's distance, in *Otherwise than Being,* the maternal is the metaphor for the 'I' that marks this state of giving as the foundational mode of the subject's coming to be.

[63] Before being a devotion to Being, subjectivity is a subjection to the Good. The Good is not the correlate of an axiological option or valorization. Subjectivity in Levinas is a subjection to the force of alterity, which demands goodness.

'essence' by substituting itself for another and in this act it is absorbed in signification, the 'saying' or the verb form of the infinite.

The one-for-the-other in the ego, also called Hospitality (see 3.3), delivers this for-the-other passively. Against ontological philosophy, which accounts for subjectivity as a locus engendered by the inner movement of Being, Levinas thus proposes subjectivity as the locus where alterity makes contact.

1.5.5 The Ethicality of Discourse: The 'Saying' over the 'Said'

The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence lies in expressing oneself, through which one serves the Other. Levinas says: "In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying" (*OTB* 94). The ethical relationship which subtends discourse "is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question" (*TI* 195). Discourse thus presents itself as justice: "language is justice" (*TI* 213) and "Justice is a right to speak" (*TI* 298). The ethical dimension of conversation and the centrality of justice recall Leopardi's "conversar cittadino, / E giustizia e pietade," in "La Ginestra" (see 3.2) where addressing the other has the same Levinasian function of strengthening the 'I' by opening it to the other.

Justice in Levinas, but this I argue is also the case in "La Ginestra" and in *Endgame*, is incorporated in the desire of the Other which, despite being by essence murderous (in Leopardi the relation with the other is a clear source of suffering), is faced with the other as the impossibility of murder: "Language, source of all signification, is born in the vertigo of infinity, which takes hold before the straightforwardness of the face, making murder possible and impossible" (*TI* 262). The ethical relation in Levinas, as in "La Ginestra" and in *Endgame*, "is imposed upon the 'I' beyond all violence by a violence that calls it entirely into question" (*TI* 47).

The orientation toward the Other in "La Ginestra" and *Endgame* is thus found, as in Levinas, in the relationship of conversation: "In the concrete the positive face of the formal structure, having the idea of infinity, is discourse, specified as an ethical relation" (*TI* 80). To approach the Other in conversation is to escape dissolution into the Neuter, a

similar concept to the one Leopardi expressed as the threat that the individual disappears within the masses (see 3.2).

But Levinas takes the relation with the Other a step further in that he equates it to teaching: "this conversation is a teaching . . . it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain" (51). Levinas proceeds to describe an early definition of 'Saying' as opposed to 'Said' "which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights" (*TI* 30). The Saying measures the pre-ontological weight of language.[64] The Said, on the other hand, is the birthplace of ontology.[65]

The other person's radical and irreducible alterity, pushed into the domain of language, becomes the Saying which disrupts and gives sense to the Said (see 3.1). It is because language now depends first on one-being-for-the-other, Saying, that there is meaning, the Said, and time, the future and the past.

In chapter three I argue that the Saying is what binds the *social catena* in Leopardi's "La Ginestra," and is also what irrevocably binds Clov to Hamm, Nell to Nagg and Winnie to Willie. Hamm, Nagg and Willie come to wound the subject so that Clov, Nell and Winnie expose themselves in their saying.[66]

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[64] Saying is never present in the Said, for the Said is already caught within the economy of truth. Saying, like the erotic, hides while uncovering and enters the Said otherwise than the vibration of the Said: it is traced in the Said−the pure future−as the disruption to which the egoist subject passively submits in a vulnerability it can never recuperate−the immemorial past. It is a matter of elaborating more precisely what is meant by 'the trace of the Other,' by the meaningfulness of the plasticity of the face, by the proximity of the Other, the non- in-difference, the for-the-other, the expression and command, the responsibility to respond to the Other, the Saying of the Said, the *diachrony* or *emphasis*.

[65] The Said is the intelligibility of system and synchrony as opposed to the Saying which is the intelligibility of signifyingness itself, which is asymmetry and diachrony: "The saying extended toward the said is a being obsessed by the other, a sensibility which the other by vocation calls upon and where no escaping is possible. . . . The other calls upon that sensibility with a vocation that wounds, calls upon an irrevocable responsibility, and thus the very identity of a subject (*OTB* 77).

[66] Levinas' second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, explores the intertwining of the Said and the Saying with time: "The entity that appears *identical* in the light of time *is* its essence in the *already said*. The phenomenon itself is a phenomenology. It is not that a discourse, coming from one knows not where, arbitrarily arranges the phases of temporality into a 'this as that.' The very exposition of Being, its manifestation, essence qua essence and entities qua entities, are spoken. It is only in the said, in the epos of

1.5.6 Time as the Postponement of Death and the Good beyond Being

Levinas focuses on the time structure of this ethical orientation-non-in-difference. He proposes that the relation with the Other has to enable the discontinuity of inner life so as to interrupt historical time. He states: "the discontinuity of Cartesian time, which requires a continuous creation, indicates the very dispersion and plurality of created being" (*TI* 58).[67] Time is indeed defined by Levinas as "the postponement of death" (*TI* 232), in its being, "the mode of existence and reality of a separated being that has entered into relation with the Other" (TI 232). The centrality of the otherness of death, particularly the way this otherness is counterpoised to the "nihilation of nothingness" (*TI* 234), is discussed in both the analyses of *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. The extraordinary everydayness of one's responsibility for other persons is also the being without regard for death, a clear opposition to the Heideggerean being-toward-death (see 2.5). Levinas explains: "In the being for death of fear I am not faced with nothingness, but faced with what is against me . . . as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other" (*TI* 234).[68] In this light the 'I' wills in a non-egoist manner, a will that flows into the essence of desire.

The Good has thus chosen the 'I' before the 'I' could choose it.[69] Levinas is fond of recalling, in this regard, Plato's words, "the Good beyond Being," a good in itself and

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saying, that the diachrony of time is not added to the identical entities it exposes; it exposes them as identities illuminated by a memorable temporality" (37).

[67] He continues to say: "In its temporalization, in which, thanks to retention, memory and history, nothing is lost, everything is presented or represented, everything is consigned and lends itself to inscription, or is synthetized or, as Heidegger would say, assembled, in which everything is crystallized or sclerosized into substance−in the recuperating temporalization, without time lost, without time to lose, and where the being of substance comes to pass− there must be signalled a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization, a transcending diachrony. . . . But if time is to show an ambiguity of being and the otherwise than being, its temporalization is to be conceived not as essence, but as saying." (*OTB* 9-10).

[68] In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas goes on to say: "The 'deepest' level of life−that of vulnerability and susceptibility to pleasure and pain− is taken to be constituted not by a relationship with death, a relationship of being with nothingness, but by a relationship with alterity" (xvi).

[69] Levinas explains: "The negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other . . . It thus diverges from nothingness as well as from being" (*OTB* 11). The immemorial is the impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time, a beyond to the said. It is interesting to point out that the

not by relation to need. Levinas chooses to quote from *Phaedrus*, "the value of the delirium that comes from God, 'winged thought' " (*TI* 49). He also specifies, however, that desire does not coincide with love as analyzed by Plato and the basic difference between the two is that "immortality is not the objective of the first movement of Desire, but the other, the Stranger" (*TI* 63).[70] Understood in these terms, the idea of Infinity is produced as Desire for the Infinite, "which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A desire perfectly disinterested–goodness" (*TI* 50). As Levinas explains: "The soul . . . dwells in what is not itself, but it acquires its own identity by this dwelling in the 'other' (and not logically, by opposition to the other)" (*TI* 115). The other provokes responsibility against my will by substituting me for the other as a hostage. One finds oneself by being accused.

1.5.7 On Being Accused, Suffering and Substitution

It is on being accused that the 'I' is singled out in the accusative "declined before any declension, possessed by the other" (*OTB* 142). The subject is described as a self, from the first in the accusative form:[71] "It is the obsession by the other, my neighbour, accusing me of a fault which I have not committed freely . . ." (*OTB* 92).[72] This is the Saying, a passive exposure to being, an exposure to death–invisible, premature and violent. I refer to this exposure to death and the idea of being accused in the exposure to

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Sovereign Good of the Greeks is referred to by Lacan as that which acts as "anti-weight" to the ego, the "*amour propre* the subject experiences as contentment in his pleasures, insofar as a look at this Good renders these pleasures less respectable" (*Écrits* 647).

[70] Levinas says: "The myth Aristophanes tells in Plato's *Symposium*, in which love reunites the two halves of one sole being, interprets the adventure as a return to self" (*TI* 254). According to Levinas, however, "To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty. In this frailty, as in the dawn, rises the Loved, who is the Beloved" (*TI* 256).

[71] It has to be underscored that the term 'accusative' is specifically used by Beckett. In both the fourth *Text for Nothing*, first published in English in 1959, and the poem 'Sanies I', written in the early thirties, Beckett chooses to interpolate the term 'accusative.' The term is taken outside its purely grammatical sense while also creating an intertextual network. The word becomes a particularly Beckettian joining of guilt to grammar. In *Endgame* I use the term accusative in the Levinasian sense without the specifically Beckettian meaning attributed to this word in the above-mentioned texts.

[72] Levinas goes on to say: "In obsession the accusation effected by categories turns into an absolute accusative in which the ego proper to free consciousness is caught up. It is an accusation without foundation, to be sure, prior to any movement of the will, an obsessional and persecuting accusation. It strips the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it. The subject is in the accusative, without recourse in being, expelled from being, outside of being" (*OTB* 110).

the Other in both the analysis of *Endgame* and *Happy Days* (3.3; 3.4). The passivity of the subject in saying is "suffering in the offering of oneself" (*OTB* 54).

In the offering of oneself lies uniqueness of the chosen one, a traumatic uniqueness. Levinas calls this being chosen without assuming the choice "goodness despite itself" (*OTB* 57). Subjectivity can be pitted against consciousness because, as Levinas states, ". . . subjectivity is not called . . . to take the role and place of the indeclinable transcendental consciousness . . . It is set up as it were in the accusative form, from the first responsible and not being able to slip away" (*OTB* 85).

As I argue in chapter three, in patience, the 'I' endures violence from the other without, however, sinking into the nothingness that reduces time to the purely subjective: "it is produced only in a world where I can die as a result of someone and for someone in patience the will breaks through the crust of its egoism and . . . displaces its centre of gravity outside of itself, to will as Desire and Goodness limited by nothing" (*TI* 239). I argue that Suffering becomes sufferable in Leopardi and Beckett specifically because the I is ruptured but simultaneously ready for substitution.[73] Levinasian ethics is echoed in the chosen works of Leopardi and Beckett in the way that ethics itself,[74] as Critchley says, ". . . is critique. It is the putting into question of the liberty, spontaneity and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. Ethics is the location of a point of otherness" (*Cambridge Companion to Levinas* 15).

This is the concept of suffering for the other I argue for in "La Ginestra," *Endgame* and *Happy Days*−a suffering that is not focused on stilling desire as is the case

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[73] Substitution is conceived as maternal support for the material destitution of another: "*the immemorable past that has not crossed the present, the positing of the self as a deposing of the ego, less than nothing as uniqueness, difference with respect to the other as non-indifference*" (*OTB* 58). Levinas says: "Subjectivity is from the first substitution offered in place of another, but before the distinction between freedom and non-freedom. . . . It is the null-place in which inspiration by the other is also expiation for the other, the psyche by which consciousness itself would come to signify. The psyche is not grafted on to a substance, but alters the substantiality of this substance which supports all things. It alters it with an alteration in which identity is brought out" (*OTB* 146).

[74] As Levinas states "ethics is no longer a simple moralism of rules which decree what is virtuous. It is the original awakening of an 'I' responsible for the other; the accession of my person to the uniqueness of the I called and elected to responsibility for the other" (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 182).

in the Beckettian "suffering of being" or Leopardian "*souffrance*," to which, before delving into the textual analyses, we first need to turn

Chapter 2

2   A Perennially Dull and Indistinct Pain: "Vain Longing that Vain Longing Go"

"He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" *Ecclesiastes* I:18

In this chapter I first compare the Leopardian "*souffrance*" and the Beckettian "suffering of being," in both cases a pain which is interwoven with the desire to cease desiring. Leopardi's and Beckett's work is extensively concerned with giving expression to the "ablation of desire," (*Proust* 18), a state which exposes the agonizing human kernel in its essence.

A word is at the outset necessary in order to explain why "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being," and the urge to suspend insatiable craving, have respectively led to these two writers' collocation within the pessimist, nihilist, and some branches of the existentialist traditions. I elucidate "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being" in relation to these three traditions and prepare the terrain for the main argument in chapters three and four where it is my contention that, despite the fact that the two writers' philosophical outlooks spring from such traditions, neither Leopardi nor Beckett is simply a pessimist, a nihilist or an existentialist. Keeping in mind Beckett's own warning against "the neatness of identifications" (*Disjecta* 19), the claim here is not that Leopardi and Beckett are non-this or anti-that negative school of thought or that they try to overcome nihilism, pessimism or existentialism (in Leopardi's case *ante-litteram*). What is being proposed is that despite the crucial abrogation of desire−and the specter of nothingness that haunts their oeuvres−Leopardi and Beckett acknowledge the irreducible quality of human desire and it is through such acknowledgement that resistance can be evinced.[75]

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[75] It has to be pointed out that despite Beckett's reading of Leopardi, where the emphasis clearly lies on the Italian poet's proposal to extinguish the flame of desire, Leopardi indeed theorizes endlessly about the infinity of desire, the contradiction between the impulse to fulfillment and unconditional happiness and the reality of "*souffrance*." When considered within the entire corpus of his work, on relatively few occasions does Leopardi advocate the removal of desire. In Leopardi, on the contrary, the attempted removal of desire

Beckett calls this irreducible desire in *Worstward Ho* the "vain longing that vain longing go" (481), an endeavor that meanders through several thinkers, most important for this context being the ataraxia of Stoic Ethics, Leopardian *atarassia* and Schopenhaur's negation of the will. "*Souffrance*" and "suffering of being," in their turn, could be compared, at least to a degree, to the quintessential underlying truth of *aletheia* in Martin Heidegger as well as the state of existing without existents in the Levinasian *il y a*. Nonetheless, the previously-mentioned sage and his knowledge acquired through desirelessness (see introduction), become incommunicable, ineffective and impossible and this is the situation Leopardi and Beckett affirm in their maturity. The ascetic is just as likely to be embittered (and in Leopardi bored) as exhilarated by his attempt to lose desire.

2.1 "*Souffrance*" and "Suffering of being"

While there are clear differences between what the "suffering of being" and "*souffrance*" imply, and the latter will be partially juxtaposed to *atarassia* and specific notions of *noia* in order to approach the meaning ascribed to the "suffering of being," the two terms also share important common ground.

In Leopardi, "*souffrance*" is directly proportional to the individual's sensitivity (see 1.2.1). The sensitive being strives to escape the trappings of civilization and in this estrangement the creative power of the imagination is enhanced.[76] Leopardi specifically states that the creative power is enhanced by stilling all the passions:

> Il poeta nel colmo dell'entusiasmo della passione ec. non è poeta, cioé non è in
> grado di poetare. All'aspetto della natura, mentre tutta l'anima sua è occupata
> dall'immagine dell'infinito, mentre le idee segli affollano al pensiero, egli non è

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often leads, I argue in this chapter, to boredom, which is not the absence of desire but desire in its purest state−desire of desiring despite the lack of an object of desire (See 2.1).

[76] This nucleus of Leopardian thought can be reconnected to one of the most famous *idéologues,* that is Pierre-Georges Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*, I, 142. All the debate around the development of the *idéologues,* from Destutt de Tracy to Maine de Biran, is present in the Leopardian analysis of passions (see 1.2.1).

capace di distinguere, di scegliere, di afferrarne veruna: in somma non è capace di nulla, né di cavare nessun frutto dalle sue sensazioni: dico nessun frutto o di considerazione e di massima, ovvero di uso e di scrittura; di teoria né di pratica. L'infinito non si può esprimere se non quando non si sente. (*Zibaldone* 714,1),

At the height of enthusiasm brought about by passion, the poet is not a poet, that is, he is not able to produce poetry. At the sight of nature when all his soul is entranced by images that evoke the infinite, when ideas crowd his thoughts, the poet is unable to distinguish, to choose, to capture any of these ideas: in short he is unable to produce anything, or to bring any of his sensations to fruition: I emphasize the lack of fruitfulness of this situation both with relation to the theory and the practice of writing. The infinite cannot be expressed if not when it is not felt. (my translation).

This longed-for stillness comes close to the Stoic ataraxia (see 2.3.1), or Leopardian *atarassia* (see 1.2.1) best described as: "non c'è maggior piacere (né maggior felicità) nella vita che il non sentirla" ("there is no greater pleasure [nor greater happiness] in life than that of not being able to feel it"; *Zibaldone* 3895; my translation]). Leopardi's *atarassia*, however, has to be oxymoronically tinged by "*souffrance*," in order to approach Beckett's "suffering of being" in its potential artistic attainment. As Leopardi says, the notion of infinity is conveyed by that which is specifically finite (clearly prefiguring Levinasian thought) and in this oxymoronic twist it evokes a sensation of pleasure, but also of pungent pain (see 1.2.1): "Tutto ciò che è finito . . . desta sempre naturalmente nell'uomo un sentimento di dolore . . . Nel tempo stesso eccita un sentimento piacevole . . . e ciò a causa dell'infinità dell'idea che si contiene in queste parole finito, ultimo" ("All that is finite . . . always naturally evokes in the human being a sentiment of pain . . . Concomitantly, it excites a pleasant sentiment . . . and this is due to the infinity of the idea contained in the words finite, ultimate"; *Zibaldone* 2251,1; my translation).

Beckett's "suffering of being," however, cannot be neatly grafted onto *atarassia* oxymoronically tinged by "*souffrance*" and, if anything, it recalls another notion

Leopardi would delve into−*noia*. *Noia* has more than one meaning and while it refers to the boredom of existence, its revised version connotes a sense of the euphoric and terrifying Burkean Sublime (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 3.2). Beckett's "suffering of being" evokes *noia* in all its nuance.

On the one hand, then, the "suffering of being" connotes the degree zero of feeling expressed by *noia*: "la noia non è altro che il vuoto dell'anima, ch' è riempito, . . . da quel pensiero, e occupato intieramente per quel punto" ("*noia* denotes nothing but the emptiness of the soul, which is filled up . . . by that thought, and entirely occupied for that end"; *Zibaldone* 88,2; my translation). In another excerpt Leopardi states, "anche il dolore che nasce dalla noia e dal sentimento della vanità delle cose è più tollerabile assai che la stessa noia" ("Even suffering that is born out of *noia* and the general vanity of things is indeed more tolerable than *noia* itself"; 72,2; my translation).[77] Here *noia* stills the subject of all tension, as Leopardi further explains in the entry dated September 30, 1821: "La noia è la piu' sterile delle passioni umane. Com'ella è figlia della nullità, così è madre del nulla: giacché non solo è sterile per sé, ma rende tale tutto ciò a cui si mesce o avvicina ec." ("*noia* is the most sterile of human passions. As it is a child to nullity, concomitantly, it mothers nothingness; insofar as it is not simply sterile per se, but it reduces to sterility everything with which it comes into contact or to which it becomes proximate"; *Zibaldone* 1815,1; my translation).

On the other hand, in *Pensieri*, *noia* becomes the most extreme form of the sublime in the spectrum of sentiments (see 1.2.1).[78] Sublime *noia* implies going through

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[77]*Noia* is always strictly connected to the existential argument in the indices in the *Zibaldone* posthumously collected as *Memorie della mia vita*. It is not a sentiment but the absence of sentiment.

[78] Leopardi states:

. . . il non potere essere soddisfatto da alcuna cosa terrena , né, per dir cosí, dalla terra intera; considerare l'ampiezza inestimabile dello spazio, il numero e la mole maravigliosa dei mondi, e trovare che tutto è poco e piccino alla capacità dell'animo proprio; immaginarsi il numero dei mondi infinito, e l'universo infinito, e sentire che l'animo e il desiderio nostro sarebbe ancora più grande che si fatto universo; . . . e però noia, pare a me il maggior segno di grandezza e di nobilità, che si vegga della natura umana. Perciò la noia è poco nota agli uomini di nessun momento, e pochissimo o nulla agli altri animali. (*Pensieri* LXVIII)

. . . the inability to be satisfied with worldliness or, so to speak, with the entire world; To consider the inestimable amplitude of space, the number of worlds and their astonishing size, then to discover that all this is small and insignificant compared to the capacity of one's own mind; to imagine the infinite number of worlds, the infinite universe, then feel that our mind and aspirations might be even greater than such a universe; . . . and yet it seems to me that *noia* is the chief sign of the grandeur and nobility of human nature.

that terrifying experience of the empty interstellar spaces, which finds expression early in Leopardi with "L'Infinito" ["The Infinite"].[79] One can sense here an echo of the same *noia* that in "Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio familiare" was intended as "desiderio puro della felicità" ("pure desire of happiness"; 176; see 1.2.1). Sublime *noia* also paradoxically approximates the Stoic *piacere del fermarsi* ("the pleasure of cessation"). This attempt at cessation at the heart of *noia* (even when it is oxymoronically conceived as desire in its pure state) is necessary in order to feel the necessarily painful but aesthetically productive condition of "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being." As Matthew Feldman surmises with relation to the "suffering of being," "for Beckett, achievements within the arts–as vehicles for the reflection necessary to apprehend, redeem and palliate painful human circumstances–become revelatory" ("Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 192).[80]

The quintessential agony necessary for the production of art in Leopardi and Beckett finds its synthesis in Schopenhauer (see 2.3.2), whereby the artist is, at all times, riveted by observations of the spectacle of what he calls the will's "objectivation." As I argue in 1.2.2 and 2.3.2, the objectification of the will is close to the Thing-in-itself. This is the Schopenhauerian Idea (of clear Platonic ascent) mentioned in *Proust*: "Its action [Habit] being precisely to hide the essence–the Idea–of the object in the haze of conception–preconception" (23). It is important to point out, however, that in Schopenhauer exposure to the Thing-in-itself through what Beckett calls, "the death of Habit and the brief suspension of its vigilance" (23), redeems the artist from life only

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This is why *noia* is practically unknown to unambitious men and scarcely or not at all known to other animals. (my translation)

[79] These infinite spaces later become a bitter image in "A se stesso," the same poem Beckett chooses to quote three times in *Proust*, where infinity becomes "l'infinita vanità del tutto" ("the boundless vanity of all"; *Canti* 234).

[80] This outlook is also expressed by Beckett when he speaks, in a letter to MacGreevy dated September 16, 1934, about the lack of a relation between the artist and the world encompassing the artist's alienation from his own self, with respect to Cézanne who "had the sense of his incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape, but even with life of his own order, even with the life–one feels looking at the self-portrait in the Tate […]–operative in himself" (*Letters* 227). In another letter to MacGreevy dated August 14, 1937, Beckett similarly praises artist Jack B. Yeats commenting, "What I feel he gets so well [. . .] is the heterogeneity of nature & the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena, the 2 solitudes" (*Letters* 540).

momentarily and can offer but an occasional source of comfort. This brief exposure, which in Beckett (but also in Leopardi) is distressful, is succinctly expressed in *Proust*: "The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering—that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom—With its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers" (*Proust* 28).

2.2 "My imagination provided equations for the unknown in this algebra of desire": the Desire to cease desiring

Beckett in *Proust* and Leopardi in "A se stesso" thus convey the message that satisfaction is essentially only ever negative and desire as lack is the prior condition for every pleasure: "whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable" (*Proust* 17). All this is carried out without taking note that, as Schopenhauer says, "we are drawing water with the vessel of the Danaids" (1: 345) and "we are caught in the veil of māyā" (1: 406).

Desiring thus constitutes a rather thick surface which Beckett in *Proust* and Leopardi in "A se stesso" reveal every intention to rip apart in order to expose what underlies the Beckettian Habit and Leopardi's "assuefazione" (which is in turn based on Rousseau's *Habitude* [see 2.2.1]). Leopardi's "assuefazione" prefigures Beckett's "alchemy of Habit [that] has transformed the individual capable of suffering into a stranger for whom the motives of that suffering are an idle tale" (*Proust* 26). In Leopardi, "assuefazione" has brought about the modern, physically-and-morally enfeebled individual in the grip of the age of positivism (see 2.2.1), who could be construed as foreshadowing the Beckettian "ballast that chains the dog to his vomit" (*Proust* 19).

As is the case with Heidegger's *Dasein* (see 2.5), Beckettian Habit and Leopardian "assuefazione" live in the possibilities that permit fleeing from an authentic awareness of death (in Heidegger conceived as its uttermost possibility; *Being and Time* 297-99). In *Proust* Beckett refers to the human being's "reluctance to die, this long and desperate and daily resistance before the perpetual exfoliation of personality" (25).

2.2.1 The Stoic Ascendancy: "*Souffrance*" and "Suffering of being"

The initial solution to the apathy that characterizes the Leopardian modern,
physically and morally weak individual (see 1.2.1; 2.4.2), in Beckett similarly
represented by the individual's "haze of …[his] smug will to live" (*Proust* 15),[81] is the
Stoic ataraxic bliss of the proverbial sage who is aloof from both jubilation and pain.

In Leopardi, such ataraxic bliss is aspired for through *atarassia*, central to
Manuale di Epitteto (1825).[82] The Stoic sage in the *Manuale di Epitteto* represents, for
the early Leopardi, the highest apex a human being can attain through the exclusive use
of reason. Stoic ethics, its penetration in the Greco-Latin world, and the subsequent
diffusion of the *cura del sé*, are central not just to the Epictetus manual, but also to the
excerpts posthumously collected as *Manuale di filosofia pratica* where Leopardi
professes to have found "un riposo dal desiderio" (repose from desire) which echoes the
Epicurean "indipendenza dai desideri" (independence from desire).[83] In the latter indices,
Leopardi inches closer to grasping the necessary rules and regulations for internal
equilibrium. Concomitantly, however, he also declares the impossibility of achieving
such inner balance.

As the Italian poet will demonstrate in his later works, and as Schopenhauer
unequivocally claims, Stoic ethics "is not a doctrine of virtue at all, but simply a guide for
rational living: its end and aim is the achievement of happiness through peace of mind"
(1: 113). Consequently, Stoic ethics is fundamentally different from ethical systems that
insist on virtue, such as Plato's doctrine. Desire keeps thwarting the aspired-for inner
peace. This can be immediately discerned from the way the Stoics were portrayed by, for
instance, Schopenhauer, who reminds us that they "were never able to present their ideal,

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[81] It is clear that Beckett is here criticizing Nietzschean thought, particularly as professed in the
posthumously published *The Will to Power*.
[82] Leopardi speaks about the idea that a certain good thing cannot be acquired, or certain evilness cannot be
avoided, which stems from Stoic philosophy. Man is only responsible for things which depend on his
choices (*Zibaldone* 65,1).
[83] Epicurus, *Lettera a Meneceo*. *Opere*, 34: "Ancora consideriamo gran bene l'indipendenza dai desideri,
non perché sempre ci debba bastare il poco, ma affinché, se non abbiamo molto, il poco ci basti" ("We still
consider it highly beneficial to be independent from desire, not because little should suffice, but so that,
once we are in a situation where we do not have aplenty, the little should suffice"; my translation) .

the Stoic sage, as a living being with inner poetic truth . . . His perfect composure, peace and bliss really contradict the essence of humanity" (1: 118).

Beckett's championing of stoicism is as shortlived as Leopardi's. As Rosen points out "Beckett's tone, like that of the cynics, is both a good deal more negative and much more playful than that of any of the classical stoics" (86). Rosen goes on to say that Beckett rejects the more hopeful aspects of both stoicism and cynicism, particularly their confidence in the mind's capacity of self-government. In Beckett's characters, insists Rosen, and this could also be said of Leopardi's poetic voices, "thought is not rationally directed but obsessively suffered" (87). Rosen describes Beckett's treatment of "the glorified apathy that is a Stoic ideal" as pervaded by "the depression that is more often its awful reality" (112). For both Beckett and Leopardi the Stoic sage did, for a period, beckon as ideal, but what both writers ultimately uphold are sages who have failed.

2.3   "*Souffrance*" and "Suffering of being" in the pessimistic tradition

I now turn to a discussion of "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being" when perceived through a philosophically pessimist lens.[84] Rosen speaks of the "thorough and combative nature of Beckett's pessimism . . . a response to human suffering and their corresponding rationales that goes beyond bitterness and wit towards a different perspective, even, perhaps, a kind of solution" (33-34). Rosen states that "while he [Beckett] remained hostile to optimistic rationalizing . . . alterations in the later writing indicate [that] . . . like most pessimists, he has found that not only is suffering inevitable but that consolation is too" (48). Rosen connects Beckett's pessimism to "the wit of introspective pessimists as Leopardi" (50), the latter also described as Beckett's "spiritual

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[84] Stoicism and Epicureanism are both oftentimes conceived as being at the roots of the long-standing tradition of pessimism. European pessimism, however, is often construed to have reached a peak in the second half of the nineteenth-century in France with thinkers like Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Dumas *fils*, Renan, Taine, Stendhal, Turgenev and Amiel. See Bourget, i.xxi-xxii. Sebastiano Timpanaro stretches the genealogy further back and construes the seeds of pessimism to be already present in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In proving his thesis, Timpanaro quotes from Voltaire's "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne."

precursor" (66). But what kind of pessimism have Leopardi and Beckett been associated with? Mark Bevir lists three types: existential, cultural and metaphysical.

The principal idea of these three pessimist philosophical trends is that the human condition is marked by severe and persisting flaws that cannot be eradicated. Leopardi and Beckett are oftentimes associated with the cultural pessimism first brought under the spotlight by Rousseau in reaction to Enlightenment thinkers. Thus the perceived 'cosmological pessimism' of Leopardi, which pessimism has not been related to any metaphysical dimension of the human being, but rather to the logical result of the material constitution of the universe, has been widely called, in Heideggerian terms, a form of *aletheia*, an uncovering of the nihilistic destiny of Western culture and thus more in sync with an existential pessimism (see 2.5). Existential Pessimists have also been associated with perceptions of human existence as partaking of absurdity. Martin Esslin's famous categorizing of Beckett as part of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, is very pertinent.[85] As I argue in chapter four, however, through their notion of humour, both Leopardi and Beckett combat such absurdist notions of existence. The typical existential pessimist, in his quasi-Stoic distancing from human affairs, only pertains to the early phases of the two writers.

Antonio Prete in his Preface to *Manuale di filosofia pratica* (part of the *Zibaldone*) explicitly states that these indices clearly indicate that pessimism is an inappropriate term to attribute to Leopardi:

> Le osservazioni del Manuale mostrano come la voce pessimismo sia davvero la più impropria per definire lo svolgimento del pensiero leopardiano. Perché fino all'ultimo il poeta ha accolto nella lingua della poesia−e nel pensiero che è suo ritmo–il deserto e il fiore, il tragico e la leggerezza, il cerchio ineludibile della finitudine e il vento del desiderio, della sua incolmabile apertura. (XIII)

> The observations noted down in the Manual reveal how the label 'pessimism' is truly the most inappropriate when it comes to charting the development of

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[85] Martin Esslin grouped together playwrights like Beckett, Eugene Ionescu and Harold Pinter and called their way of doing theatre– the theatre of the absurd.

Leopardian thought. Till the very end the poet captured in the language of poetry—and in the thought which constitutes its rhythm—the desert and the flower, that which is tragic and that which pertains to lightness, the ineluctable circle of finitude and the boundlessness of the wind of desire. (my translation)

Both Leopardi and Beckett, however, have been prominently collocated in the metaphysical pessimist tradition, typified by Schopenhauer, and quintessentially represented by Quietism.

2.3.1 *"Souffrance"* and "Suffering of being" in the Quietist Tradition

Leopardi's immediate heir and Beckett's primary influence when it comes to the possibility of desirelessness (and will-lessness) is Schopenhauer (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 2.3.2). Schopenhauer echoes the ubiquitous Leopardian *"souffrance"* when he states that one "will also find enough in the suffering animal world to convince himself how essential suffering is to all life" (1: 337). Similarly, the idea of life as a *"pensum,"* which Beckett first encountered in Schopenhauer (Nixon, *German Diaries* 32) was of momentous importance to him.[86] Beckett's thoughts on life as *"pensum"* are evident in his reading of the Italian *"artisan de ses malheurs"* (a clear reference to Leopardi).[87] Leopardi's *"souffrance"* and Beckett's "suffering of being," can thus be read as intermediated by Schopenhauer construed in the quietist tradition, a central pillar of which thought is the

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[86] "Das Leben ist ein Pensum zum Abarbeiten: in diesem Sinne ist defunctus ein schooner Ausdruck [Life is a *pensum* to be worked off: in this sense *defunctus* is a fine expression]" (Nixon, *German Diaries* 32). Schopenhauer follows earlier generations of pessimists, emphasizing the centrality of *Weltschmerz* (world-weariness), the latter summarizing Beckett's engagement with literary and philosophical pessimism.

[87] Mark Nixon's account of Beckett's interest in the "quietistic and pessimistic tradition" is exclusively in terms of German Literature ("Scraps of German" 264, 278; *German Diaries* 51-6) while Feldman's quietist reading is in terms of an "agnostic quietism," ("Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 184). Ackerley defines quietism as a "doctrine of extreme asceticism and contemplative devotion teaching that the chief duty of man is the contemplation of God, or Christ, to become independent of outward circumstances and sensual distraction" (88). Beckett's letter to MacGreevy on March 10, 1935, on the other hand, eschews non-secular attributes of quietism, "quietism of the sparrow . . . An abject self-referring quietism indeed, beside the alert quiet of one who always had Jesus for his darling, but the only kind that I, who seem never to have had the least faculty or disposition for the supernatural, could elicit from the text" (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 180).

rejection of desire (distinct from the Pyrrhonian '*epoché*'),[88] crucial to Leopardi and Beckett (Feldman, "Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 183-200).[89]

Schopenhauer indeed underscores what is pivotal to both Leopardi and Beckett: boredom as a pure experience of time. The attempt to escape such boredom is proposed through asceticism or self-denial following the Stoics' suppression of desire. The Leopardian desiring at the core of which is "*souffrance*," the division between "*principium individuationis*" and the thing-in-itself and Beckett's Habit and Boredom that need to be ripped apart in order to expose the "suffering of being" come close to giving expression to the solitary quietist moment where the suspension of desire is both painful and aesthetically necessary.[90] Indeed, the disparate features of pessimism, skepticism[91] and melancholy contribute to the Quietist Weltanschauung from which Leopardi's, Schopenhauer's, and Beckett's writings emerge.

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[88]*Epoché* played an important role in Pyrrhonism, the skeptical philosophy named after Pyrrho. *Epoché* is, according to this tradition, the suspension of judgment or the withholding of assent cultivated by the ancient skeptics. According to this tradition, only by refusing either to affirm or to deny the truth of what we cannot know, can we achieve ataraxia.

[89] In a letter to MacGreevy Beckett speaks of the ideals of "humility, utility, self-effacement" (See Feldman, "Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 184). Knowlson refers to Beckett's "quietistic impulse" (*Damned to Fame* 353) while Chris Ackerley explores this thread in "Samuel Beckett and Thomas á Kempis: The Roots of Quietism." John Pilling's *Beckett's Dream Notebook* also documents the development of Beckett's quietist outlook underscoring references from Thomas á Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and, even more prominently, St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

[90] Gottfried Büttner links Schopenhauer's pessimism to Beckett's "melancholic temperament, his inclination to resignation," while ensuring this particular trait remains distinct from nihilism (114-15). I will discuss the issue of Beckett as nihilist at further length below. For the time being, it is sufficient to focus on Büttner's three Schopenhauerian recommendations that he reads in Beckett when it comes to the miserable endurance of life−aesthetic contemplation, compassion and resignation. While I fully concur with the first two, I find myself in disagreement with the third, but I will discuss this in detail in chapters three and four. In these chapters I argue that accepting suffering does not automatically imply resigning oneself to it as much as denouncing the material world and desire does not automatically imply forfeiting it.

[90]Quietism was initiated, according to W. R. Inge's 1899 *Christian Mysticism*, by Miguel de Molinos (c. 1640-95) in the pursuit of self-perfection and knowledge of God. This doctrine, however, was ultimately condemned as heretical.

[91]By skepticism we understand an undoing of values that never arrives at their complete annihilation. This position is expressed by E. M. Cioran in "Skeptic and Barbarian," in *The Fall into Time* (1964). In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche defined skepticism as "a consequence of decadence, as is libertinism of the spirit" (26). Rosen says that Beckett's "skepticism serves to balance and offset his pessimism" (51) and quoting Sextus Empiricus ("the originating hope of skepticism . . . is the hope of attaining quietude") he speaks of Beckett as turning from "pessimism to skepticism as a healing alternative" (53). The skepticism Beckett turned to is aware of being "this ataraxy of self-thinking thought" (54), "a state of mental suspension and . . . a state of unperturbedness or quietude" (54).

In both Leopardi's "*souffrance*" and Beckett's "suffering of being," the aesthetic potential of this desire-free moment is emphasized. It is an engagement with the quietist tradition that is secular.[92] Beckett aptly describes this lonely, melancholic spirit in *Proust* where "for the artist, who does not deal in surfaces, the rejection of friendship is not only reasonable, but a necessity" (64). He continues to say: "the artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude . . . The artist is active, but negatively . . . drawn into the core of the eddy" (65-66). This description of the artist perfectly echoes the one given by Leopardi, particularly with reference to the poet (see 2.2).

Nixon reports that in Beckett's *Watt* notebooks there is further reference to Leopardi's poem "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia," the poem that perhaps best recites Leopardian pessimism. Nixon also quotes a letter dated April 21, 1958 sent to A.J. Leventhal where Beckett confirmed that "Leopardi was a strong influence when I was young (his pessimism, not his patriotism!)" (*German Diaries* 200). According to Feldman, however, "Leopardi's 'brooding' . . . rightly turns our focus from style and understatement toward content and sentiment . . . the thread linking these views is strongly rooted in a personal asceticism, one eschewing the distractions and sufferings of the world as ceaseless and superfluous" (186).

It is important to once more underscore that what Feldman is claiming about a "personal asceticism" with respect to Leopardi is only valid for the early phase.[93] I argue

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[92]As Martin and Allard point out, pain is "not external to modern aesthetics as one possible object to be imitated but internal to it as its very condition" (4-5). In a wonderfully ambiguous statement from his German diaries dated February 1937, Beckett expresses his wish "to turn this dereliction, profoundly felt, into literature" (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 252). Beckett went on to sketch, in this same diary, a new section which he significantly entitled "Journal of a Melancholic," manuscript material that is mostly lost. See Nixon's *German Diaries*. Furthermore, in his "Homage to Jack B. Yeats" Beckett would say that "the artist, who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith" (*Disjecta* 149).

[93] In the early indices posthumously collected as *Manuale di filosofia pratica*, for instance, Leopardi identifies in *amor proprio* the excessive inclination bent on itself, soon transformed into "*souffrance*" (see 1.2.1). This self-love can come close to self-hatred, which is hell-bent to destroy the self: "io dunque era il solo soggetto possibile dell'odio, non avendo riconosciuto esternamente altra persona colla quale potessi irritarmi de' miei mali, e quindi altro soggetto capace di essere odiato per questo motivo" (" I was thus the only possible subject of all this hate, not being able to recognize, externally, any other person with whom to be irritated because of my pains and thus no other subject whom I could hate for this reason,"; *Zibaldone* 506; my translation). Suicide becomes the extreme form of revenge on the self: "Concepiva un desiderio ardente di vendicarmi sopra me stesso . . . e provava una gioia feroce ma somma nell'idea del suicidio" ("I

that Leopardi in "La Ginestra," and Beckett in his transition from prose to drama offer a different perspective on suffering and desire (see 3.2; 3.3; 3.4). Beneath the thick film of Leopardian "assuefazione" lay the desires which have been repressed from their esteemed place in Antiquity and childhood. In emphasizing the latter, the Italian poet-philosopher clearly distances himself from the early ascetic model.[94] Leopardi will finally ascribe importance to desire citing the people of Antiquity as the ones who were truly capable of experiencing its intensity.[95] Feldman's assertion that "Leopardi's conviction stands as a central buttress to Beckett's quietism" ("Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 186) is thus completely correct only insofar as it relates to the early phase of Leopardi.

2.3.2 Immediate heir of "*Souffrance*" and source of inspiration for the "Suffering of being": Schopenhauer's Negation of the Will

Leopardi's "wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire" (*Proust* 18) is immediately bequeathed by Schopenhauer. The latter's thoughts on desire, through which the Will manifests itself, become highly relevant when the

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conceived an ardent desire to avenge myself . . . and I felt an overall ferocious joy at the idea of suicide"; my translation). This desire could be construed as a striving for entropy, the death-drive mentioned in 1.2.1 and 2.2. Leopardi's modern individual living in the era of positivism is deprived of passion: "non prova mai passione o sentimento che si lanci all'esterno o si rannicchi nell'interno, ma quasi tutte le sue passioni si contengono per così dire nel mezzo del suo animo, vale a dire che non lo commuovono se non mediocremente, gli lasciano il libero esercizio di tutte le sue facoltà naturali, abitudini ecc.. In maniera che la massima parte della sua vita si passa nell'indifferenza e conseguentemente nella noia, mancando d'impressioni forti e straordinarie" ("he never demonstrates passion or sentiment that is externally visible or that takes root internally, but all his passions are locked, so to speak, in the midst of his soul, that is, he is never moved if not in a mediocre manner, he is allowed the free exercise of all his natural faculties, habits etc. in such a way that the majority of his life is spent in indifference and consequently in boredom, deprived of strong and extraordinary impressions"; *Zibaldone* 266,1; my translation).
[94] Feldman reports that a typed copy of "A se stesso" is included in Beckett's "Interwar Notes." See Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's "Interwar Notes."*
[95] ". . . era più ordinariamente presso gli antichi, appo i quali la fermezza e la costanza e la forza e la magnanimità erano virtù molto più ordinarie che fra I moderni. E vedendo essi che spesse volte anzi frequentissimamente i casi della vita si oppongono ai desideri dell'uomo, erano compresi da terrore per la ragione della loro immobilità nel desiderare" (". . . it was ordinarily to be found in the people of Antiquity, whose firmness, consistency and magnanimity were more ordinary virtues than they are in modern times. And noticing that oftentimes, very often I would say, life opposes the human being's desires, the people of Antiquity were overcome by terror when their ability to desire seemed to be immobilized"; *Zibaldone* 90; my translation).

affirmation is pitted against the negation of Will, an argument that prefigures the notion of desire as it evolves into its psychoanalytic version (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 1.3).[96]

It is interesting to point out that for Schopenhauer the negation of one's desires and will relates to moral goodness. When one's distinction between oneself and others begins to fall away, one feels the suffering throughout the world as if it were one's own. It has to be underlined, however, that while compassionate moral goodness and extreme will-lessness clearly involve a shift away from the natural affirmation of the will, it is equally evident that morality, as Schopenhauer conceives it, surely involves vehement willing, as Levinas points out (see 3.1).

The most interesting question concerning this state of will-lessness, however, hinges on the already introduced aesthetic implications. Schopenhauer crucially highlights how the negation of the will enables for a blessed moment that the human being perceives a timeless Idea.[97] Schopenhauer makes an argument that perfectly echoes the early works of Leopardi where, in searching rest from the "distracting contingencies" of desire, he resorts to the philosophy of Epicurus:

> . . . then suddenly the peace that we always sought on the first path of willing but that always eluded us comes of its own accord, and all is well with us. It is the painless state that Epicurus prized as the highest good and the state of the gods: for that moment we are freed from the terrible pressure of the will, we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing, the wheel of Ixion stands still. (1: 220)

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[96] For Schopenhauer, "the nature of every desire is pain: attainment quickly gives rise to satiety: the goal was only apparent: possession takes away the stimulus: the desire, the need re-emerges in a new form: if not, then what follows is dreariness, emptiness, boredom, and the struggle against these is just as painful as the struggle against want." (1: 340).The complete self-abolition and negation of the will is the only thing that can appease the impulses of the will forever and is the "*summum bonum*" (1: 389).

[97] Schopenhauer echoes Plato when he accords genuine being to the Ideas alone, while granting only an apparent, dream-like existence to the world that is real for the individual: "When the Idea emerges, subject and object can no longer be distinguished within it because the Idea, the adequate objecthood of the will, the genuine world as representation, arises only to the extent that subject and object reciprocally fill and completely permeate each other; in just the same way, the individual cognizing and the individual thing thus cognized are, as things in themselves, indistinguishable" (1: 203).

 The price for this precious epiphany is nothing less than the wholesale dissolution of the subject–the same painful kernel of Beckett's "suffering of being" and Leopardian "*souffrance*." An absolutely clean break between willing and will-lessness, desire and the ablation of desire, however, seems not to be achievable for human beings (see introduction). Neither the self as embodied, will-driven individual, nor the self as pure, pain-free subject yields entirely to the other. Asceticism (see 1.2.2) is not tenable. Desire survives and needs to be readdressed as is evident in this hilarious but effective passage from *Watt*: "It is useless not to seek, not to want, for when you cease to seek you start to find, and when you cease to want, then life begins to ram her fish and chips down your gullet until you puke, and then the puke down your gullet until you puke the puke, and then the puked puke until you begin to like it" (43).

Desire resurfaces and it is through experiencing it that sensing the underlying suffering becomes possible: a suffering that can bring about a compassion that is less Schopenhauerian than it is Levinasian because it is a compassion brought about by the presence of desire not by its removal (see 3.1).

2.4   Leopardi and Beckett within the nihilist tradition

Schopenhauer's philosophy of the negation of the will has also been termed "passive nihilism" (36) as opposed to "active nihilism," the latter implying, in Friedrich Nietzsche's posthumously published *The Will to Power*, a "violent force of destruction" (18, Nietzsche's emphasis).[98] Nietzsche is indeed a central figure in any discussion on nihilism.[99] In 1885-86, Nietzsche speaks of "pessimism as a preliminary form of

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[98]The conflation of the terms 'nihilism' and 'pessimism' is not uncommon. Paul Bourget, for instance, uses the term *nihilism* of an entire movement in French literature from Baudelaire to Flaubert and Maupassant, a movement characterized, according to Bourget, by its 'pessimism,' its 'misanthropy' and its 'world-weariness' (i.xxii).

[99]In Nietzsche's works written for publication, the term 'nihilist' first appears in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a philosophy of the future* (1886), where it refers to those "fanatics of conscience who would rather lie dying on an assured nothing than an uncertain something" (11). The words 'nihilism' and 'nihilist' are then used repeatedly in the sequence of works written between 1887 and Nietzsche's collapse in January 1889, including *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where it appears more often than in any of his other published works, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo*. In these texts, the term 'nihilism' is almost always used in reference to religion. In an autumn 1887 notebook entry, Nietzsche poses the question "What does nihilism mean?" He answers: "That the highest values devaluate themselves" (*The Will to Power* 9). The phrase 'God is dead' is Nietzsche's well-known shorthand for this

nihilism" (11) and pits "pessimism as decline" to the favourably looked-on "pessimism as strength" (11).[100] As Shane Weller makes the distinction, "pessimism of the weak kind−that is Schopenhauerian pessimism as opposed to Nietzsche's own 'pessimism of strength,' which embraces the most fearsome thoughts about existence" (*Modernism and Nihilism* 33), clearly show that 'pessimism of strength' is Nietzsche's synonym for nihilism. In entry 91 in "European Nihilism" (*The Will to Power*), Nietzsche criticizes the "narrowness and inconsequence of pessimism à la Schopenhauer or, worse, Leopardi"[101] and admits that "this type of pessimism . . . can be perceived here and there in my *Birth of Tragedy*" (*The Will to Power* 56).[102] Clearly Nietzsche's conception of pessimism becomes increasingly closely aligned to active nihilism.[103] It is also evident that while

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devaluation. Shane Weller suggests that "there is much in Nietzsche's notebooks to suggest that he took nihilism to have arisen in the nineteenth century, as a development out of Romantic pessimism" (*Modernism and Nihilism* 32). Recent works on nihilism offer suggestive discriminations between various forms of nihilism. For instance, in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (1988), Donald A. Crosby distinguishes five distinct kinds: political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential. Crosby says that whichever form it takes, the term 'nihilism' always implies negation or denial of a specific aspect of human life.

[100] In entry 31 he says: "European pessimism is still in its early stages–bears witness against itself: it still lacks that tremendous, yearning rigidity of expression in which the Nothing is reflected, . . . is still far too contrived and too little "organic"–too much a pessimism of scholars and poets: I mean, much of it is excogitated and invented, is 'created' and not a 'cause.'" (21). Furthermore, in entry 33, Nietzsche attributes the advent of pessimism to the fact that "the most powerful desires of life . . . have hitherto been slandered" (22). In entry 34 he states: "Modern pessimism is an expression of the uselessness of the modern world–not of the world of existence" (23). In entry 82 he speaks of the chief symptoms of pessimism: "Russian pessimism (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky); aesthetic pessimism, *l'art pour l'art*, 'description' (romantic and anti-romantic pessimism); epistemological pessimism (Schopenhauer, phenomenalism); anarchistic pessimism; the 'religion of pity,' Buddhistic pre-movement; cultural pessimism (exoticism, cosmopolitanism); moralistic pessimism: I myself" (51). As to the development of pessimism into nihilism, Nietzsche describes it as follows "Denaturalization of values. Scholasticism of values. Detached and idealistic, values, instead of dominating and guiding action, turn against action and condemn it . . . pessimism is not a problem but a symptom" (24).

[101] It is well-established that Nietzsche knew and appreciated Leopardi. See Giuseppina Restivo, "Caliban\Clov and Leopardi's Boy: Beckett and Postmodernism," 224.

[102] In this entry where Leopardi is mentioned, Nietzsche also theorizes laughter in a Leopardian spirit: "perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he suffers so deeply that he *had* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as fitting, the most cheerful" (*The Will to Power* 56; see 4.1).

[103] In the excerpts collected in *The Will to Power* Nietzsche sheds the clear Schopenhauerian influence of *The Birth of Tragedy*. In entry 17 he claims: "has the ideal itself been renounced?–At bottom, the last metaphysicians still seek in it true "reality," the "thing-in-itself" compared to which everything else is merely apparent. It is their dogma that our apparent world, being so plainly *not* the expression of this ideal, cannot be 'true'–and that, at bottom, it does not even lead us back to that metaphysical world as its cause. The unconditional, representing that highest perfection, cannot possibly be the ground of all that is conditional. Schopenhauer wanted it otherwise and therefore had to conceive of this metaphysical ground as the opposite of the ideal – as 'evil, blind will' that way it could be that "which appears," that which

Leopardi and Schopenhauer are influential in the early works, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche increasingly came to renounce these models.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the influence of Leopardi's and Schopenhauer's conception of art is evident. Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian reminds us of Schopenhauer's distinction between the Thing-in-itself and the "*principium individuationis*."[104] The aesthetic interpretation in Nietzsche, however, is the affirmation of life as that which is characterized by and which pierces into the "semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 23).[105]

While Dionysian art might be connected to artistic production in states-of-being similar to "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being," it is clear that, as Nietzsche says in *The Will to Power*, "Art . . . [is] the only superior counterforce to all will to [the] denial of life" (452). Like Leopardi and Schopenhauer before him, then, Nietzsche privileges the aesthetic as the only superior counterforce to deployments of the idea of nothingness but his proposition of the overcoming of nihilism entails the affirmation, rather than denial of the will (*The Will to Power* 35).[106] In *On the Genealogy of Morals* he affirms, "to place himself in the service of the ascetic ideal is therefore the most distinctive corruption of an

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reveals itself in the world of appearances. But even so he did not renounce the absoluteness of the ideal" (*The Will to Power* 16).

[104]Nietzsche would attack the notion of the thing-in-itself in Book Three of the posthumously- published *The Will to Power*.

[105]In *The Birth of Tragedy* he claims that in Attic tragedy the truth about existence is rendered bearable. The "highest and, indeed, the truly serious task of art" is "to save the eye from gazing into the horrors of night and to deliver the subject by the healing balm of illusion from the spasms of the will" (118). In his later work, Nietzsche will continue to describe art as both veiling and transfiguring but it is clearly the latter idea that will come to dominate his thinking of art. As Weller points out, however, "there are … at least two key differences between Nietzsche's early and later position regarding art. First, he attempts to move away from a Schopenhauerian conception of art as a form of consolation- this move Nietzsche seeks to achieve by privileging the Dionysian over the Apollonian. Secondly, he changes his mind on where that Dionysian art is realized in modernity" (*Modernism and Nihilism* 83).

[106] Perhaps this is a central motive for Beckett's breaking away from Nietzsche already by the time of *Proust*, where the philosopher of *amor fati* is rather gratuitously attacked. Beckett also rankles against Andre Gide's Nietzschean exhortation to "live dangerously" (mentioned in *Proust*) which is, for the early Beckett, too fundamentally affirmative of the will to live.

artist that is at all possible" (153-54, emphasis mine).[107] Rather than proposing an overcoming of nihilism in Nietzchean fashion, or any overcoming of nihilism as such, the emphasis in the coming chapter will be on how the 'nothingness' at the heart of nihilism can be opposed through the art of writers like Leopardi and Beckett. Their literary works, I argue, combat 'nothingness' through the evocation of a sense of the infinite. Most interesting for this study then, is the opposition to nihilism offered by the notion of infinity.

The opposition to 'nothingness' through the evocation of 'infinity' will become central in the third chapter where I argue that Leopardi and Beckett are not nihilist specifically because the desire of the Other, as it is manifested in their work, is both an infinite desire but also a desire that, in facing the finite, intuits the Sublime infinite beyond.

2.4.1 Leopardi the nihilist

The 'nothingness' against which the notion of infinity is pitted in this study, has been perceived as crucial since the first authoritative opinions on Leopardi expressed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (see 1.2.2; 2.4). The radically polarized positions expressed by Benedetto Croce and Emanuele Severino, at the two opposite ends of the twentieth-century, put the definition of Leopardi's philosophy at the crux of a fierce debate. Very revealingly, the twentieth century opened with Croce denying any genuinely theoretical dimension to Leopardi's works, considering his contribution purely confined to poetic production (see 1.2.1). At the opposite end of the temporal and critical spectrum, Emanuele Severino published *Il nulla e la poesia* (1990) and *Cosa arcana e stupenda: L'Occidente e Leopardi* (1997). In these works he defined Leopardi as the most radical nihilist thinker of the Italian philosophical tradition, arguing that Leopardi's works bring into light the general movement of Western history and philosophy.

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[107]In *The Will to Power* "disintegration of the will . . . is distinguished by the weakness of the personality" (27). The coordination under a single predominant impulse results in a "strong will" defined by the precision of direction (28-29). Concomitantly, however, he praises "adiaphoria" (indifference). He says "the will is weak–and the prescription to avoid stupidities would be to have a strong will and to do *nothing*– *Contradictio*" (28). In entry 268 he also praises the Stoics' defence against will (153).

The interpretation of Leopardi as a writer with a clear focus on the existential nothingness is obviously not unfounded. In passages collected in the Donzelli edition of the *Zibaldone*, posthumously entitled *Della Natura degli uomini e delle cose*, Leopardi presents the anguished human being when faced by nothingness. Leopardi successfully predicted a scenario for modern times where civilization is defined by the loss of absolutes, blinded by the progressive and positivist myth, by the annulment of time and the self-absorption in the solipsistic egotism of the self. This bleak prediction reaches its climax in the contemplation of suicide in excerpts from the *Trattato delle passioni*: "Concepiva un desiderio ardente di vendicarmi sopra me stesso e colla mia vita della mia necessaria infelicità inseparabile dall'esistenza mia, e provava una gioia feroce ma somma nell'idea del suicidio" ("I conceived an ardent desire to take revenge upon myself and with my own life upon the necessary unhappiness of my existence and I felt a ferocious, albeit convinced, joy at the idea of suicide"; *Zibaldone* 503; my translation).[108]

As opposed to the resistance in the *titanismo* of Antiquity, Leopardi describes two types of the modern human being. According to the first type, feelings (desire included) are repressed and, as in the Freudian hydraulic model proposed in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, desire is not only not destroyed but, on the contrary, it threatens to erupt any time with reinvigorated force and abrupt aggression that turns the subject against itself through "l'odio di se stesso (perché resta ancora all'uomo tanta forza di amor proprio, da potersi odiare)" ("self-hatred [because there is still in the human being considerable self-love to hate himself]"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation).

The second Leopardian delineation of the perfectly modern human being, however, prefigures the tone of indifference and nihilism of some later drama in Beckett. This is the modern human being the likes of whom "il mondo è pieno oggidi" ("the current world witnesses aplenty"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation). The latter individual is not even capable of hating himself because "l'uomo non ha più tanto amor proprio da

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[108] The collection of these indices has been compared to Montaigne's *Essais* even though Leopardi never acknowledged the influence of this writer. See *Introduzione* to Leopardi, *Trattato delle passioni*, lxxxvii. Furthermore, the Greek exponent of Stoic Ethics, Epictetus, and the Latin exponents, Seneca and Cicero, are clearly common sources in both Montaigne and Leopardi, not to mention the role of go-between played out by J.J Rousseau.

aver forza di odiarsi" ("the human being no longer has enough self-love in order to be capable of self-hatred"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation; see 1.2.1). In this state, the human being is depleted of compassion because his faculties have numbed "tutta la facoltà sensitiva, desiderativa etc." ("his sensitivity, his ability to desire etc.; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation). This is once more proximate to Beckettian Boredom and Habit whereby the human being is similarly merely able to "tenere una vita metodica, e di nulla mutare o innovare" ("follow a methodic life without ever changing or innovating anything"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation). The consequences of this "stato di tranquilla disperazione" ("a state of quiet despair"; *Zibaldone* 618,2; my translation) is that *amor proprio*, a quality that is abundant in Antiquity, is transmuted into what Leopardi terms *inazione* (inaction), *indifferenza* (indifference) and *assuefazione*. Thus while *amor proprio* is held to be an essential element in self-assertion: "l'amor di se stesso è l'unica possibile molla delle azioni e dei sentimenti umani" ("self-love is the only possible trigger of human action and sentiment"; *Zibaldone* 958,1; my translation),[109] the absence of *amor proprio* leads to total indifference. Self-love taken to an extreme, on the other hand, degenerates into negative passions like hatred, egoism and envy. In *Zibaldone* 2204-08, Leopardi speaks about excessive *amor proprio* which also locks the subject into neurotic isolation and this is why, in 958,1, Leopardi links self-love to "Sventura" (Misfortune).[110] Excessive *amor proprio* enervates modern man because excessive desire and an overabundance of imagination impede action: "Spesse volte il troppo o l'eccesso è padre del nulla" ("oftentimes things that result in excess lead to nothingness"; *Zibaldone* 714,1; my translation).[111] The limiting force of *amor proprio* in Leopardi, as had been the case for Rousseau, is the *mauvaise honte*.[112]

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[109]*Amor proprio* is found, among other themes, in the Index to the *Zibaldone,* cross-referenced with "*desiderio*" and "*compassione*." The argument that *amor proprio* is at the basis of social action is made by Cesare Luporini in *Leopardi Progressivo*, 185-274.

[110] Leopardi states: "se l'egoismo è intero, la società non esiste se non di nome. Perché ciascuno individuo non avendo per fine se non se medesimo, non curando affatto il ben comune, e nessun pensiero o azione sua essendo diretta al bene o piacere altrui, ciascuno individuo forma da se solo una società a parte, ed intera, e perfettamente distinta, giacché perfettamente distinto il suo fine" ("if society is entirely egoistic, it does not exist but in name. Because every individual, not having as his goal but his own well-being, not being at all bothered by the common good, and not directing any of his actions towards the common good or others' pleasure, forms on his own an entire society apart, which is perfectly distinct given that its end is perfectly distinct"; *Zibaldone* 669,1; my translation).

[111]Action, that which makes morality possible, is inhibited in those who have excessive *amor proprio* and those who are extremely sensitive. *Amor proprio, Vitalità* and *Sensibilità* are brought together in 4037,6.

It is interesting to note that in *Pensieri* Leopardi defines with bitter clarity the malice underlying *amor proprio* at the heart of Leopardian desire interlacing it to the analysis of "timore" ("fear;" see 1.2.1), defined as the most perfect and quintessential expression of egoism. *Amor proprio*, and fear of what is exterior to it, bring about this self-absorbed state of being suspended in a timeless vacuum and in total centripetal activity as a result of interlacing with "incivilimento" ("civil education"; preface to *Trattato delle passioni* xii; my translation). This second description of the modern individual provided by Leopardi could indeed justify attributes of 'nihilism.'

In a somewhat non-historic past, however, Leopardi identifies the other side of desire of *amor proprio*, reconnecting once more to the world of Antiquity (1.2.1). This obverse side reveals the presumed fullness of time which can be temporarily recouped through the state of the "fanciullo" (child), in whom everything that is linked to an archetypal imagination and knowledge has its roots.[113] The way to reconnect to these roots is by reaching out to nature through our present civilization. This attempt at a reconnection on the part of the modern human being can result in the conversion of reason to passion through an exercise of rationality, "convertir la ragione in passione" (*Zibaldone* 293-294, see 3.1; 3.2) pursuing not nothingness but the infinite transfiguration of desire into illusions.

This *amor proprio* differentiates itself from the "*cura del se'*" of the Greek world (see 2.3.1). Its excesses stall action: "L'eccesso delle sensazioni o la soprabbondanza loro, si converte in insensibilità. Ella produce l'indolenza e l'inazione" ("excessive sensation, excess of sensations or its overabundance brings about insensitivity. It produces indolence and inaction"; *Zibaldone* 714,1; my translation).

[112]Rousseau's *mauvaise honte*, which Leopardi somewhat assimilates, is the inertia which impedes social relations and, in the bored and desperate human being, it contrasts with the ease with which he rubbishes anything human. The same desperate modern individual who does not fear death, fears society confronted with which he loses his courage, because of the fear of being ridiculed. The fear provokes inability to act and to change "per tema di peggiorar quella vita della quale egli non fa più caso alcuno, della quale ei dispera, che non può parergli possibile a divenir peggiore" ("for fear of worsening that life to which he is no longer attached, of which he so despairs that it does not seem it could get any worse"; *Zibaldone* 3492; my translation).

[113] This theory is elaborated in observations 1555 and 2684-85 of the *Zibaldone* and in the *operetta morale* that, not coincidentally, deploys the Eden scene as backdrop, the "Storia del genere umano."

2.4.2 Beckett the nihilist: *Ubi nihil vales, Ibi nihil velis*

Beckett is also oftentimes associated (again no doubt justifiably) with the expression of nothingness. Despite the centrality of nothingness in his work, however, Beckett vehemently rejected the nihilist label: "I simply cannot understand why some people call me a nihilist. There is no basis for that" (Büttner 122). In *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* Shane Weller points out that Beckett's writing has been perceived to attest rather to anti-nihilism. This is especially the case following criticism associated with Deconstruction but already anticipated by Theodor Adorno. Beckett as among the most classically nihilist writers had by the time of post-structuralism long since become a most well-wrought of well-wrought urns. Given the centrality for this study of Levinas' desire of the Other, the anti-nihilist reading of Beckett on the part of critics like Badiou and Critchley (see below) is not surprising. In an interview published under the title "I Have a Taste for the Secret" in 2001, Derrida describes negation of alterity as "nihilism." He affirms that it is a form of violence that does not leave space for the other (92). On similar lines, in chapter three I argue that Beckett's works resist nihilism specifically by opening a space for alterity.[114] Nonetheless, in *A Taste for the Negative* and later works, Shane Weller insists that nihilism of sorts still haunts Beckett's oeuvre (*Modernism and Nihilism* 130). Weller, however, also points out resistance to nihilism in Beckett that lies specifically in the "residual difference" deployed in his work (*A Taste for the Negative* 137).

Theodor Adorno claims that Beckett cannot be perceived as nihilistic. In the section on nihilism in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno finds in Beckett's work the abiding within the negative which he takes as the only genuine countering of nihilism. Alain Badiou also declares that he is "entirely opposed to the widely held view that Beckett

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[114] Derrida interestingly sees in Beckett's work both nihilism and resistance to nihilism. He explains that nihilism is located in the content but, most crucially, Derrida states that the resistance to nihilism is to be found in the form of Beckett's work, in the way it elbows room for the other, in the "composition, the rhetoric, the construction and rhythm of his works" (*Acts of Literature* 61). Literature, as Derrida conceives it (and Beckett's oeuvre falls under this category), reveals the alterity at the heart of the same. It is precisely on account of this space for alterity that literature is, according to Derrida, to be accorded a privilege in the struggle against the bad violence of nihilism defined as the annihilation of alterity. When seeking to justify deconstruction, Derrida will specifically appeal to an ethic of hospitality and the value of the other.

moved towards a nihilistic destitution, towards a radical opacity of significations" (*On Beckett* 55). As I discuss in 3.3 and 4.8, Badiou reads in Beckett's work "a powerful love for human obstinacy, for tireless desire, for humanity reduced to its stubbornness and malice" (75). Critchley (see 3.3; 4.8) similarly dismisses the nihilist label as the "stalest of all the stale philosophical clichés" (*Very Little…Almost Nothing* 176). Critchley insists that Beckett offers "an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption" (179).

In "Three Dialogues" Beckett tries to come to theoretical terms with the possibility of an art that defines itself outside the quest for closure, which is nonetheless elusive, in a writing that is aporetic in nature. Negation is here the very work of language concerned with the presence of things before consciousness.[115] The desire of 'repose' from desire, the latter resulting only in suffering (for as long as it remains unsatisfied) and boredom (as soon as it is satisfied), does not lie in nothing. Art will have to be rethought in relation to failure. The other-than-nothing is thus wrapped up in the same acceptance that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" (125).[116] This idea is already apparent in nascent form in Beckett's famous letter to Axel Kaun.

In this letter Beckett defines the reason for the negation of art, and thus of language, through language itself to be "to get at the things (or the nothingness) behind it . . . to bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it–be it something or nothing–begins to seep through" (*Disjecta* 172). What lurks behind, the something or nothing, is exposed when life (as habit) is interrupted. This leads us back to insight into the "suffering of being" without which no art would be possible. In Beckett's own works, the impossibility of nothing will thus have to be thought in relation not to nihilism but to the inevitability of both nothing and its obverse: the infinite.

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[115] In the third of "Three Dialogues" Beckett speaks of the artist Bram Van Velde's ability to express another-than-nothing in that he is "the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act" (121).

[116] The ultimate aim of the writer's "assault on words" has thus become a failing process, a "literature of the unword" (*Disjecta* 173). The art of negation and the centrality of art originating in its own impossibility are thus rethought in *Three Dialogues*.

E.M. Cioran conceives of a position in Beckett that is closer to skepticism and that explores the notion of nothingness as a start point. In 1976 Cioran wrote of Beckett:

> Ever since our first encounter, I have realized that he reached the limit that he perhaps began there, at the impossible, at the exceptional, at the impasse. And the admirable thing is that he has not budged, that having come up against a wall from the start, he has persevered, as valiant as he has always been: the limit-situation as point of departure, the end as advent! (*Anathemas and Admirations* 134-35; Cioran's emphasis)

These remarks point towards a resistance of nihilism in Beckett rethought in the form of endurance. Beckett does state that the entry point to his work is the maxim from Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis* ("where you are worth nothing, you should want nothing," my translation). In a 1967 letter reprinted in *Disjecta*, Beckett writes: "If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the 'Naught is more real'. . . and the 'Ubi nihil vales. . .' both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational" (S. Kennedy 300). The "naught is more real" is a powerful phrase which is oftentimes attributed to Democritus (see 4.8). Juxtaposing Geulincx and Democritus, and proposing this juxtaposition as an entry point to the study of his own work, is indeed effective in Beckett in that there is a productive argument to be had between the two philosophers on the subject of nothingness.

The centrality of Democritus' guffaw for Beckett, I argue in chapter four, does anything but prove his nihilism. Democritus' is a laugh of indifference towards ontological impermanence and it derives cerebral power out of the knowledge of the illusory nature of earthly attachment. As to Geulincx, while Beckett's fixation with the *Ubi nihil vales Ibi nihil velis* maxim in correspondence stretched over a long period of time (Tucker, *"Murphy, Geulincx"* 205), Beckett's works develop in many different ways in the thirty years following the most Geulincxian of Beckett's works–*Murphy*. While, as Tucker asserts, "Geulincx remains with Beckett, resurfacing by name in 'The End,' *Molloy*, and *The Unnamable*" (Tucker, *"Murphy, Geulincx"* 206), direct references to Geulincx elsewhere have not, so far, been identified, and the 'where you are worth

nothing, you should want nothing' is countered by theatrical characters that both want, but also do explore, an ethical dimension to their wanting. It is an ethical dimension that, rather than exult nothingness, indeed contributes towards evoking a sense of the infinite.

2.5 "*Souffrance*" and "Suffering of being" within the Heideggerian existential tradition and the Levinasian "*Il y a*"

Leopardi and Beckett have also been associated with the existential school of thought. In Leopardi, poems like "Canto Notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" have been read as marvelous expressions of existential anguish.[117] In arguing for Leopardi's and Beckett's reintroduction in their work of desire as crucial (see chapter three), I will primarily argue for a Levinasian desire that is in dialectic with the teachings of, among others, Heidegger. The thoughts of Heidegger on nihilism greatly expand Nietzsche's, the critique of whose thought comes to occupy a central place in Heidegger's thinking in the 1930s.[118] Heidegger points out that to ask after 'nothing' is the very opposite of nihilism, since it is to ask after Being (Sein). According to Heidegger, asking after Being is the sole path towards the overcoming of nihilism.[119]

For Heidegger, the essence of nihilism lies in the negation of the difference between Being and beings. In his view, Nietzsche's proposed overcoming of nihilism through a revaluation of all values is in fact the consummation of nihilism as the

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[117] Thinkers like Albert Camus will give expression to the existential questions prefigured by Leopardi on desire. Camus states that the absurdity of the human predicament lies in the "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints; my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together" (50).

[118] In addition to the lectures on Nietzsche, which were published over two decades after their delivery in 1961, the essays and treatises in which Heidegger articulates his own conception of nihilism include "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" (1943), "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being'" (1944-6), and "The Essence of Nihilism" (1946-8).

[119] Nihilism is thus at work:

. . . Where one clings to current beings and believes it is enough to take beings, as before, just as the beings that they are. But with this, one rejects the question of Being and treats Being as a nothing, which in a certain way it even 'is', insofar as it essentially unfolds. Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being−that is nihilism. Nihilism thus understood is the ground for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of *The Will to Power*. (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 217)

forgetting of Being.[120] To recognize the nihilism and the decline in the forgetting of Being is, according to Heidegger, pivotal. By recognizing the deracination brought about through the forgetting of Being, Heidegger's phenomenology was perceived as leading individuals to "take hold of ourselves" in an authentic "resolution" of existence. Heidegger insists on the disclosure of being, or what for the Greeks was *aletheia*: 'truth'.[121] This underlying 'truth' could, to a degree, be equated with the Leopardian "*souffrance*" and the Beckettian "suffering of being." What is common to all three notions is that getting to their essential core is a way to move away from inauthenticity (a merely generalized, undistinguished, and anonymous 'anyone') towards authenticity– "resoluteness of being in the face of death" (Carr 679).[122] Levinas, however, repudiates this idea insisting that death is, on the contrary, the most Other.[123]

Levinas claims that Heidegger, along with other existentialist thinkers, actually failed to focus on what he thought was the key philosophical problem after the world wars: how to intellectually and morally engage and transform the violent, brutal and inhumane tendencies that underlie the Western philosophical outlook.[124] In 3.3, where I analyze Beckett's *Endgame*, I argue that such a concern also troubles the immediate post-

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[120] "Nietzsche knew and experienced nihilism because he himself thought nihilistically. Nietzsche's concept of nihilism is itself nihilistic" (Heidegger, *Nietzsche* 4: 22).

[121] It has to be pointed out that by the mid-forties Heidegger will claim that "The essence of nihilism is not at all the affair of man, but of Being itself, and thereby of course also a matter of the *essence* of man, and only in *that* sequence at the same time a human concern" (*Nietzsche* 4: 221).

[122] Beyond all the differences between Heidegger and Nietzsche, both come to see (like Leopardi and Schopenhauer before them) art as the counterforce to nihilism. In poetry (particularly that of Hölderlin) Heidegger finds a language that names Being. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," published in *Off the Beaten Track* Heidegger argues that the genuine work of art "opens up, in its own way, the being of beings" (19).

[123] Levinas states: "The relationship with the Other is indeed posed by Heidegger as an ontological structure of *Dasein*. Then again, does solitude derive its tragic character from nothingness or from the privation of the Other that death accentuates? There is at least an ambiguity. I find here an invitation to go beyond the definition of solitude by sociality and sociality by solitude . . . In thus going back to the ontological root of solitude I hope to glimpse wherein this solitude can be exceeded. . . . This is when I come up against the problems of suffering and death . . . Before the death will be mystery and not necessarily nothingness, the absorption of one term by the other does not come about. I shall show finally how the duality evinced in death becomes the relationship with the other and time" (*Time and the Other* 40-41).

[124] Another philosopher to famously turn the tables on Heidegger's emphasis on Being is Theodor Adorno who sees Heidegger's thinking of Being as nihilism on account of its being profoundly "hostile to man", centred as it is around "being towards death and the negating nothingness" (*Against Epistemology* 189). In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno speaks of the "absolute integration" (362) which reaches its consummation at Auschwitz. This integration is nihilist in that it reduces alterity and difference to nothing. For Adorno, then, as for Levinas, nihilism lies in the negation of otherness. The only way in which to counter this nihilist destruction of alterity for Adorno is to remain within the negative and resist the temptation of the positive.

war works of Beckett. In his critique of Heidegger, Levinas starts off by taking the Heideggerean distinction between Sein and Seindes, Being and being, and grafting onto these the terms existing and existent, without, as he states, "ascribing a specifically existentialist meaning to these terms" (*Time and the Other* 44). He continues to say:

> . . . the 'fact-of-being-thrown-in'. . . existence. It is as if the existent appeared only in an existence that preceded it, as though existence were independent of the existent, and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence. It is precisely because of this that there is desertion and abandonment. (*Time and the Other* 46).

But Levinas forcefully reiterates that "existing does not exist. It is the existent that exists." Thus, he asks, how are we to approach this existing without existents? His answer is what he will refer to as the *il y a*, a state that, from more than one angle, can be perceived as, once more, approaching Beckett's "suffering of being" and Leopardi's *atarassia* tinged by "*souffrance.*" The *il y a* is the "nocturnal dimension of the future" (*TI* 142). Against the anonymous *il y a*, the happiness of enjoyment affirms the I at home with itself. The happiness of enjoyment flourishes on the pain of need because "it anticipates the joy of satisfaction, which is better than ataraxy" (*TI* 145).[125] The

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[125] In Levinas, the self is initially conceived as anonymous and striving to become conscious to itself. This state is Levinas' "there is" (*il y a*), which will be crucial in my analysis of *Happy Days* (see 3.4). Coincidentally, this is also Toshiki Tajiri's 2012 reading of *Happy Days* in "Everyday Life and the Pain of Existence in *Happy Days*" in *Beckett and Pain*, 135-51. In the *il y a* there is existence, but not determined beings.The *Il y a* is forbiddingly difficult to present succinctly and the clearest way to describe it is as a state where all things return to nothingness, which results in an indeterminate 'something'. What remains is "the impersonal 'field of forces' of existing", which is neither subjective nor substantive (*Time and the Other* 46-47). For Levinas "Being is evil not because it is finite but because it is without limits" (*Time and the Other* 51). The feat of the ego is specifically that of withdrawing from the situation of impersonal vigilance: "Consciousness is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the *there is*; it is already hypostasis; it refers to a situation where an existent is put in touch with its existing" (*Time and the Other* 51). Hypostasis is the emergence of the uniqueness of the self (*Existence and Existents* 83). Hypostasis makes possible the virility of the subject "manifest in the phenomenon of the present in the light." (*Time and the Other* 74). The suffering of anonymous existence demonstrates the dangers posed when the self is trying to determine itself self-sufficiently (see 3.4).This is in part a modification of Heidegger's viewing existing as an attribute of a being. Levinas interprets the solitude of Heidegger's *es gibt*, which indeed becomes the *il y a*, as one of insomnia in which impersonal existence is "a vigilance without possible recourse to sleep" (*Time and the Other* 48-49). This impossibility of withdrawing signifies an existence that is "precisely the absence of all self a without-self" (*Time and the Other* 49). In Levinas' later work there is a shift away from the prior *of* consciousness (which ultimately is the *il y a*) to the prior *to* consciousness, Levinas'

Levinasian 'need,' and more emphatically Levinasian desire, (see 1.5) marks a way out of the state of the *il y a* and thus of impersonal existential pain. Levinas says, "pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment. Enjoyment is made of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching. It is the act that remembers its 'potency'. . . It is . . . already the exceeding of being" (*TI* 113).

In chapter three, I argue that in both Leopardi and Beckett there is a Levinasian kind of desire which opposes the centrality of Being, particularly in the spirit of Levinas' reading of Heidegger's phenomenology. Instead there is an attempt to refocus on the individuality of being, the Other in all his or her otherness.

The Other in "La Ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* is a unique mystery. The relationship with the Other conceived in these terms is meant to be an escape from solitude which is other than absorption of the ego. Opening to the desire for the Other and thus to compassion lies in "the welcoming of the face [which] is peaceable from the first, for it answers to the unquenchable Desire for Infinity" (*TI* 150). In the coming chapters I attempt to show how in the infinite desire at the heart of both compassion and dark humour, states-of-being like *il y a*, "suffering of being" and "*souffrance*" are not conceived of as without exit.

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immemorial past or 'an-archy.' Levinas' way out of the *il ya*, is through the confrontation with suffering in the face-to-face relationship and thus through an ethical response to suffering.

Chapter 3

3   Making Suffering Sufferable: Desire for the Other in Leopardi and Beckett

"Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others"

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov* Book VI, IIa.

In this chapter Lacanian and Levinasian desire are read side by side, a comparative reading that becomes central to the analyses that follow.[126] I first focus on the founding moment of subjectivity in the desire of the O/other for Lacan and Levinas by briefly revisiting Lacan's "Mirror Stage," "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" and Levinas's *Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*. Drawing on *Totality and Infinity*, I discuss the Levinasian desire of the Other, located in the crucial face-to-face relationship and its interlacing with language and discourse. The latter connection is explored in Lacan through "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" and "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious".

The confrontation between Lacan and Levinas sets the stage for the textual examination. I first examine Leopardi's post-1828 lyrical output leading up to the *ciclo d'Aspasia* poems, culminating in the analysis of one of the last *canti*: "La Ginestra o Il Fiore del Deserto." I then proceed to a reading of Beckett's plays *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, where I exclusively focus on the dramatic rather than the theatrical text.[127]

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[126] It is here pertinent to point out that psychoanalytic studies has been a strong area of Beckett criticism, particularly in France. Jean-Michel Rabaté's contribution through *Beckett avant Beckett* (1984) has been seminal, but Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have shown recurrent interest in Beckett's work. Starting from the mid- 1980s, they placed his work in a political as well as a psychoanalytic perspective. As to Levinas, there is little criticism that makes a clear connection between the two thinkers. One good exception, however, is Anthony Uhlmann's *Beckett and Poststructuralism*.

[127] In using the terms "drama" and "theatre" and "dramatic" versus "theatrical text", I follow Keir Elam where the dramatic text is exclusively the written text of the play and the theatrical text is the performed play. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2.

My aim is twofold. Firstly, I show that Lacan's famous statement concerning the paradoxical infinitude of desire–"not to want to desire and to desire [not to want to speak and to speak] are the same thing" (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 235) – can be partially placed at the root of Leopardi's and Beckett's art.[128] The Leopardian and Beckettian torn subjects under scrutiny infinitely long for a reunification with the Other in a never-occurred perfectly blissful past, a frustrated longing whose aggression is transferred onto language.

On its obverse side, however, the role of the Other could very well fit the Other in the Levinasian being-for-the-Other, where the self is compelled to respond to responsibility and the call to suffer for and address the "other" whose obscurity makes him Other, the latter taking precedence over the self's freedom and decision. The Levinasian Other is first defined in *Time and the Other* where, "the Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity" (83). In Leopardi's and Beckett's chosen works I thus read a desire that hollows out and accentuates dearth, albeit it is a desire on which a challenge is imposed, a challenge that compels towards responsibility and, very significantly, a very unique kind of Levinasian compassion.[129] It is in the discomforting desire of the Other found in speech as the possibility of communication, in the Levinasian 'saying' rather than the 'said' (see 1.5.6), in substitution for the Other, that this unique kind of compassion can be construed.[130]

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[128] The thread of this argument is taken up again in chapter four, where I explore the infinite desire at the heart of the subversive Leopardian and Beckettian humour.

[129] Levinas explains the conditions of possibility for compassion as follows: "The non-indifference of responsibility to the point of substitution for the neighbour is the source of all compassion. It is responsibility for the very outrage that the other, who qua other excludes me, inflicts on me, for the persecution with which, before any intention, he persecutes me" *(OTB* 166).

[130] The linguistic encounter in Levinas is the encounter with singularity. The saying acts as a sign of the Levinasian being for-the-other. It is this original approach of the other that in fact founds language and grounds the possibility of exchange. Through the ethical encounter, through the linguistic approach of the other, language is not only transcended, but language itself also comes to be. Thus in acceding to language, while Lacan would see subjection to the Symbolic order, Levinas sees the possibility of the excess of the ethical, the good-beyond-being.

I read the Leopardian poems as defined by the poetic I's self-denial and the regressive movement of Imaginary desire (see 1.4.2), while simultaneously being permeated by an equally pugnacious combative spirit. This self-denial tendency is strongly countered by the time the reader gets to "La Ginestra." The increasingly pressing concern to confront the irritating strangeness of the face-to-face encounter and the striving to become a desiring being for-the-Other become pivotal. In "La Ginestra" the individual is encouraged to seek solace by desiring to forge a social chain ("La Ginestra" in *Canti* 296-97), emerging to communicate with an otherwise hostile other and, as in the Levinasian Other, to find its strength in addressing and being-for-this-Other. Solidarity among men against the sublime in nature–"contro l'empia natura / Strinse i mortali in social catena" ("that first joined mortals in a common pact / against unholy nature"; La Ginestra" lines 148-49 in *Canti* 296-97)–is Leopardi's *ultra-filosofia*.[131] This same alliance in misery is also manifested in the *Operette morali* in "Dialogo di Plotino e Porfirio," where the two characters finally agree to forge a pact which prefigures the "social catena" in "La Ginestra." This social chain represents an attempt at resisting the burden of human existence through shouldering responsibility for the other, who is ultimately Other.[132]

My second aim is to concentrate on the latter desire in the Leopardian and Beckettian literary subjects and explore how desire also resists nihilism and is best understood and expressed in terms of its animating principles−the indeclinable obligations to address, to be held responsible for and to be compassionate towards the Other. In *Endgame* and *Happy Days* I contrast the interminable desire of protagonists Clov, Nell, and Winnie to their difficult task in facing the other person who, directly or

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[131] For Leopardi philosophy always entails a system of sorts: " Frattanto però io dico che qualunque uomo ha forza di pensare da sé, qualunque s'interna colle sue proprie facoltà e, dirò così, co' suoi propri passi, nella considerazione delle cose, in somma qualunque vero pensatore, non può assolutamente a meno di non formarsi, o di non seguire, o generalmente di non avere un sistema" ("In the meantime, however, I would say that any man who has a mind of his own and is able to think, anyone who immerses himself with his own faculties, and, so to speak, with his own thinking processes in the consideration of everything around him, in short any real thinker, cannot seriously follow and formulate his thoughts without having a system"; *Zibaldone* 945,2; my translation).

[132] Society for Leopardi is characterized by its Machiavellism: "Veramente e perfettamente compassionevoli, non si possono trovare fra gli uomini" ("Truly and perfectly compassionate human beings cannot be found"; *Zibaldone* 4287, 1 my translation). I conceive the Leopardian Other as characterized by his otherness in spite of which he/she needs to be addressed.

indirectly, has called the 'self' to be ethically responsible. In *Endgame*, the direct and unmediated urge to speak is unmistakable in the dialogue. *Happy Days* contains lengthy monologues punctured by little response. The latter aspect highlights the urge to escape the tormenting and self-absorbing mechanisms of the mind, and particularly the unconscious, behind this speech. The vivid recognition of one's pain and that of others compels these characters to want to take the sting out of desire and prevent further suffering from coming in. This becomes possible not through cleansing oneself of desire, as was the case in *Proust* and, in part, Leopardi in "A se stesso" (see 2.1), but through complete and lasting renunciation of desire. In the latter renunciation lies the admittance not only of desire's perennial remainder that ineluctably resists but also of the possibility of a desire through which one can intuit the infinite.

In Leopardi, this infinite desire is present in the same dialectical process that characterizes Leopardian art which does not accept totalizing negation as much as it refuses absolute affirmation. This aspect was already highlighted in the nineteenth-century by Francesco De Sanctis who pointed out that the affirmation implied in the negation in Leopardi underscores the important reflection on desire (*Leopardi* 276). Leopardian art is founded on an inconclusive open-endedness which points towards an essential human desire that, even in its minimalist residue, ultimately remains. In *Endgame* and *Happy Days* I read a similarly inexhaustible desire that, on the one hand, in its perforating force perennially burdens the being. On the other hand, however, it finds its expression through being for and addressing the Other. This desire takes the shape of Clov and Hamm's and Nell and Nagg's problematic being "for-the-Other" and Winnie's desperate attempt to be a being-for-Willie, the latter in his radical otherness and absent presence.

The Leopardian poetic 'I' in the later poems and the dramatic protagonists that mark Beckett's move from prose to drama[133] oscillate between being torn subjects unable

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[133] As Séan Kennedy points out the move from prose to drama was also marked by an ethical concern: "Beckett's impasse was ethical as well as aesthetic in that it threatened an end to representation in both the linguistic and political senses of that word, and it may be that Beckett's turn to theatre after the *Trilogy* was an attempt to re-negotiate the terms of his fidelity to trauma in ways that allowed him to bear witness to more than his felt inadequacy"; introduction, *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive,* 6.

to reconcile with themselves while being inexorably bent on addressing, suffering and, almost against their will, desiring-the-good-of-the-Other. In short these poetic voices and dramatic personae are here being construed as paradoxically capable of a unique kind of compassion.[134]

In Leopardi's later poetry and Beckett's early drama one can sense the recognition of the inextinguishable human desire emerging out of the struggle between the Symbolic and the static image of the Imaginary. It is in the struggle between the bodily wanting of the union-in-Otherness which is life-desire in the Symbolic and what Lacan terms 'demand' which is conceptually close to non-desire in the Imaginary (the desire not to desire or anti-desire, see 1.4.2), that the infinite desire for the Other can be evinced.

There is indeed parallelism between Leopardi and Beckett in their acknowledgement of desire as the ultimate minimal remainder that can bring about a unique kind of compassion in their philosophy of resistance to the sense of nothingness. In this light, Beckett's antidote to the aporia of living is, I argue, more in sync with that of Leopardi than has been acknowledged so far.

3.1   Lacanian versus Levinasian Desire

I now turn to a comparative reading of Lacanian and Levinasian desire which will be crucial for the textual analysis of Leopardi's poetry and Beckett's plays. Lacan and Levinas (who wrote and lectured about similar themes at about the same time in Paris) represent two competing methodologies: the psychoanalytic (see 1.4) and the phenomenological-philosophical (1.5). Notwithstanding this, desire rooted in subjectivity

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[134] The search for the good is only applicable to Levinasian desire. When it comes to Lacanian desire, Lacan himself shows that the search for the good and the expression of desire stand in each other's way. He writes: "The dimension of the good erects a strong wall across the path of our desire. It is, in fact, at every moment and always, the first barrier that we have to deal with" (*Seminar VII* 230). At a later point in the same seminar Lacan is even more explicit: "Our daily experience proves to us that beneath what we call the subject's defenses, the paths leading to the pursuit of the good . . . reveal themselves to us constantly . . . the whole analytical experience [then] is no more than an invitation to the revelation of his desire [as that which stands in the way of the good–and vice versa]" (*Seminar VII* 221). An ethics of psychoanalysis aims the patient away from a pursuit of the good and toward her desire, which points the patient toward her Unconscious. The conflicts of the Unconscious as ethical are seen more clearly in the Real onto which the grafting of a sense of the moral as a basic driving force takes place: "Moral action is, in effect, grafted on to the real" (*Seminar VII* 21).

is problematized in both authors and is construed in both thinkers as the state of being of over-determined agents resulting from external as well as internal practices. For both Lacan and Levinas the subject is a social subject, one categorized in terms prescribed by the Symbolic/social order. Indeed both authors are interested in how these over-determined agents structure the subject's ethicality–ethical in the sense of responsibility to oneself and, above all, for others. Furthermore, for both Lacan and Levinas, the subject's sexed position calls the latter into relation with another and his or her ability to speak is predicated on a preexisting system of meaning.[135]

Lacan and Levinas indeed share some basic interests and, as David Ross Fryer claims, "Both Levinas and Lacan view their projects as attempts to intervene in the liberal humanist constructions of ethical systems, examining and questioning the nature and the role of the subject in moral action" (*The Intervention of the Other* 19). In the first chapter, I introduced Lacan's psychoanalytic study of subjectivity in the unveiling of its rooting in desire, leading to the understanding of psychic conflict lodged within the Unconscious. As explained in 1.4, Lacan is concerned with the way the vicissitudes of the drives are manifested in language and thus meaning is seen as occluded and only partially available through an examination of the extraneous. In Levinasian thought, on the other hand, meaning emerges through strict philosophical analysis. Levinas' *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* and *Otherwise Than Being* deal with language but more from a conscious, moral and, at least in the former work, from a perception that still recalls a phenomenological angle.[136] Human consciousness in Levinas is an essential starting point, although transcendence is posited beyond mundane consciousness.[137] For Levinas, I argue below, it is the 'an-archic' foundation from the past that structures subjects' desire for-the-Other.[138] Both Lacan and Levinas thus deal with the said deep

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[135] Only for Levinas, however, and I shall amplify on this below, is this pre-existing system indicative of an ethical order prior to signification.

[136] In the first book Levinas focuses on ethics and alterity, in the second he deals with the modalities that orient a subject that is sensitive to otherness. *Otherwise Than Being* can also be read as a revision of *Totality and Infinity* influenced by Jacques Derrida's 1978 reading of the earlier work in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas."

[137] Unlike Edmund Husserl, Levinas will insist on a radical transcendence; a transcendence beyond human consciousness. See 2.5.

[138] An-archy is the immemorial past but also the pure future, both existing outside synchronous time. An-archy is a mode of temporality not representable by historical narrative or rational discourse. If the

structure of ethical subjectivity, expressed as the ethical demand of the Other as the grounding hermeneutic horizon.[139]

3.1.1 Lacanian alongside Levinasian Desire

I now briefly retrace the two notions of desire by reading Lacanian alongside Levinasian desire. I then revisit each thinker separately to consider issues relevant to this study but which prove tricky when read alongside. The point of departure for both Lacanian and Levinasian desire is the intervention of the other. The linguistic system undergirds both Lacan's and Levinas' thought and the linguistic order emerges into their respective modes of thinking. In Lacan it is that through which the subject comes to be while for Levinas it is that by which the subject becomes situated.[140] For both Lacan and Levinas the 'self' is not an established ego prior to its encounter with the other. It is the other imposing its existence on the 'self' that requires the latter to emerge out of its solitude and take on an identity. Such an identity is for both Lacan and Levinas an identity of the other. As a result, the desire of the other becomes, in different ways for the two thinkers, the desire of the self. The intervention of the other thus marks the shift, in Lacan and Levinas, out of the humanist paradigm into the post-humanist (see 1.1). The self now finds itself as subject in and through the eyes of the other. It is in the creation of

intelligible is correlated to vision, this in turn opens up the question of consciousness. Consciousness is the directedness of an ' I' toward its object of thought whereby the object of thought remains object, being kept within the realm of the self and the same. In vision as intentionality, the other is reduced to an object of presence. In this, the temporality of thought as re-presentation is privileged. Levinas, on the other hand, privileges the diachronic reading of temporality. In this manner time can be examined beyond the confines of being and representation.The immemorial is thus the impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time.

[139] David Ross Fryer aptly defines ethical subjectivity: "It means that in studying both ethics and subjectivity, our focus is on those things that structure us . . . ethical in the sense of being originally bound to each other in ways that cannot, or at least should not, be denied or ignored, ethical in the sense that, at our very core, we, as subjects, have commitments that we need to be aware of, what we need to nurture and cultivate, and that it is these commitments that make us who and what we are." (*The Intervention of the Other* 18).

[140] Whereas for Lacan the linguistic is primarily a symbolic order, for Levinas the linguistic has a special relation to the ontological, a special relationship to Being itself. For Lacan, the linguistic order is the end in itself. The linguistic order constructs in the subject a split, a breach. For Levinas, the resistance of the subject to the linguistic is a resistance of the singular in the face of the universal. The subject who emerges as constituted by but resistant to language is post-humanist.

the imaginary ego-self in Lacan and the construction of the subject in Levinas as marked by the linguistic intervention of the Other that desire is rooted.

Having said this, a key difference remains because Lacan's critique of ego psychology and the resulting de-centred subject (see 1.4.1) is conceived differently than in Levinas, where the 'self' is still whole when it is called to assume its prior obligation and take on responsibility for the other. When this happens there is no conflict of conscious and unconscious desires and no fiction of unity to which it falsely adheres. It is unified as entirely for the other person and it redirects its desire to the other as Other. In this, a Levinasian humanism of the other person retains the unity associated with humanism, but none of the self-sufficient power of the humanist self. Instead, this self-now-subject is decidedly created by and for the other. What I mean by this is that rather than going in the direction of what Lacan conceives of as a torn subject, Levinas redirects desire towards the other person to invite transcendence beyond self-centric needs and towards the subsequent discovery of a deeper and stronger desire than that of self-interest, self-sufficiency and individualism.

Thus while in Lacan the sense of self comes from the other in an endless and elusive search for gratification of one's relational needs that ultimately results in internal aggression, in Levinas, the subject declares, like the Biblical Abraham−"Heneni"−"Here I am!"[141] understanding that the 'I" is responsible for the other's suffering and that "the node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility" (*Ethics and Infinity* 95).[142] It is also pertinent to reiterate that whereas for Lacan the Other is in language itself, in the Symbolic order, for Levinas the Other is beyond both ontology and

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[141] In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas explains: "The ego stripped by the trauma of persecution of its scornful and imperialist subjectivity, is reduced to the 'here I am,' in a transparency without opaqueness, without heavy zones propitious for evasion. 'Here I am' as a witness of the Infinite, but a witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence. There is witness, a unique structure, an exception to the rule of being, irreducible to representation, only of the Infinite. The Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. On the contrary the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite. It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified." (*OTB* 146).

[142] The meaning of suffering in Levinas' *Time and the Other* is directly linked to the solitude of the existent to which reference is made in the analysis of *Happy Days*: "Pain and sorrow are the phenomena to which the solitude of the existent is finally reduced" (68). The difference between existing and existence is explored in 2.5.

the linguistic system: "this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent–precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being" (*Totality and Infinity* 48). This "prior to" is also the case with ethicality where for Lacan the Unconscious, in which desire and the ethical are rooted, is both prior to and is figured by the Symbolic order.[143] For Levinas a conception of the ethical is possible beyond language and ontology in the Levinasian 'an-archy.'[144]

In spite of these divergences, I agree with Critchley when he suggests that the Lacanian conception of the Other can be woven through Levinas' version of the Other, as are all three Lacanian registers. As Critchley puts it, the Levinasian subject's confrontation with the Other, like the Lacanian one, is emptied out by a "non-intentional affectivity" that "tears into my subjectivity like an explosion, like a bomb that detonates without warning, like a bullet that hits me in the dark, fired from an unseen gun by an unknown assailant" (*Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* 190). Critchley, however, stretches the argument to correlate Lacan's description of the encounter with the Real to Levinas' description of the encounter with the face. This is clearly too neat a grafting of Lacan onto Levinas, and as Ross Fryer points out, it overlooks that the Real only is in relation to the Symbolic, while the face is an-archic and stands outside the realm of discursive signification including the Lacanian Symbolic (*The Intervention of the Other* 217-8).

The grafting of Lacan onto Levinas that I here suggest is loose, hinting at similarity not congruence. Furthermore, it is pertinent to clarify that in the textual

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[143] On the concept of "prior to" of crucial importance is Lacan's treatment of the drive with which he deals in the *Seminar, Book XI*, translated as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

[144] Indeed for Levinas it is not just the possibility of the good-beyond-being but also the God beyond being, into which issue I do not specifically delve. However, for Levinas the word God signifies something otherwise than presence and immanence: "the idea of God causes the breakup of the thinking that–as investment, synopsis, and synthesis–merely encloses in a presence, re-presents, brings back to presence, or lets be" (*Of God who comes to mind* 62-3). Similarly the good-beyond-being is a good beyond presence. It is in disrupting the idea of "presence" that objects can stand as subjects thereby becoming other than same. Consciousness is the reduction of all things to being and presence and therefore to the same. The problem of consciousness is also a problem of temporality, for in consciousness all is remembered as an event, an occurrence, with a beginning–an origin. Here everything can be reduced to a phenomenon, and as such to presentation and representation. In reducing the past to a modification of the present it becomes synchronous with the present and as such lumped in the register of the same. The "ethical encounter" with the other as an-archic is diachronous not synchronous with the present. It is not reducible to the same but, rather, exists within the realm of the other. It shakes consciousness and thus shakes immanence in its opening up to transcendence.

analyses that follow Lacanian and Levinasian desire will be pitted against each other and not superimposed. At the centre of Levinas' thought then, one could make a connection between the unique, irreducible face-to-face encounter and the Lacanian Imaginary, which, in its stark confrontation of pain and suffering, calls out for pity, responsibility and unique compassion. The Levinasian Other, recalls (but is not equivalent to) the dreaded neighbour-as-Stranger, the Lacanian Real, while the language that mediates the Other, also in its upbraiding, accusative aspect (see 1.5.7), could be construed as conceptually close to the Symbolic.[145] From the viewpoint of the Symbolic order it is also relevant to point out that for Levinas the Other bears the same responsibility for me as I do for him. The reference to the other person in the social chain proposed in "La Ginestra," Hamm and Nagg (*Endgame*) and Willie (*Happy Days*) are here conceived as such an Other mediated by an accusative language that elects the poetic voice in "La Ginestra," Clov, Nell and Winnie respectively. The latter have to endure, shoulder the responsibility and find in themselves the unique compassion that results from this encounter.

3.1.2 Revisiting Lacanian Desire

I will now turn to Lacanian desire *per se*, briefly revisiting its emergence in relation to the subsequent literary analyses. I would like to reiterate that for the purposes of this study, I am mainly interested in the French psychoanalyst's theory of desire as an infinite and paradoxical force and its effect on language.[146] I certainly do not consider Leopardi's and Beckett's art an illustration of preconceived psychoanalytic concepts. Since Lacan's theory refers to 'organic' human beings and not to the deliberate creations of poetic voices or dramatic personae, I cannot directly relate Lacan's timing of the subject's splitting (according to the three orders) to either poetic voices or dramatic

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[145] The elusive concept of the Real is thus here taken to be central to Lacan's theories of subjectivity but I am not making a one-to-one equation between the face of the other and the encounter with the Real. Furthermore, even though certain works have emerged that focus more on the Real as the key to Lacan, such a focus is not unanimously recognized as essential for a proper understanding of Lacan's work. Van Pelt's *The Other side of Desire: Lacan's Theory of the Registers* (2000), for instance, has very little to say about the Real, focusing almost exclusively on the other two registers.

[146] In particular I refer to spoken language, extending the concept to include the words spoken by a poetic voice and by dramatic personae.

characters. While I attempt to illustrate how the notion of desire manifests itself in the poems and plays under discussion, I do not make reference to Lacan's name-of-the-Father. It also appears to be highly reductive to classify Leopardi's poetic voice(s) or Beckett's dramatic characters in terms of psychological symptoms such as hysteria or psychosis. Instead, I propose that consciousness and language by themselves can be examined with respect to the suffering in Leopardi's poetic voice(s) and Beckett's dramatic personae.

As explored in the Mirror Stage essay, alluded to in 1.4.1, the emergence of Lacanian desire takes place in the linguistic expression of a repressed longing to return to a never-occurred primordial perfection. The foundational moment for the creation of this fictive unity of the self occurs in this very stage, which results in alienation and aggression toward the other in the self. The resolution of this nodal point is in the Oedipal complex which significantly marks the shift from the duality of the Imaginary to the trifold structure of the Symbolic order, marking subjectivity in relation to the Other.

The Lacanian Other, thus, never 'is" (see 1.4.2) and in both the Leopardian poetic 'I's desire for the Other and the characters in *Endgame* and *Happy Days* to whom I attribute this role, the Other remains distant, elusive, larger-than-life, in some cases almost a fiction. It is precisely in this fictive quality in the formation of the subject and its own unconscious feelings of not-knowing and incompleteness that the Unconscious is able to exert its power (see 1.3; 1.4).

The poetic "I" in Leopardi's later *canti* as well as Beckett's Clov, Nell and Winnie are, when perceived from this specific angle, Lacanian subjects in search of a completeness that never existed and they come to see themselves as defined by the discourse of the Other. Desire has been displaced onto other objects, but particularly onto language and it is through the upbraiding accusative aspect of the latter that they attempt to mediate their way to the other.

In "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," Lacan focuses on the displacement of desire onto the image of the fragmented body. He says, "Aggressiveness presents itself in analysis as an aggressive intention and as an image of corporal dislocation" (*Écrits* 84). I

argue that this fragmentation of the body reflecting aggression is present in both the self-denial bent of the speaking "I" of Leopardi's later poems and the truncated bodies in *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. I read the same internal aggression that Lacan claims to be created during the formation of the ego, and the fundamentally alienating aspect of the taking up of an identity via the splitting of the subject, in the combative and pugnacious spirit that permeates Leopardi's poems, particularly the post-1828 poems, and the aggressively cynical reactions of Clov, Nell and Winnie. This is the same aggression which knows its birth, as Lacan points out, in an "erotic relationship, in which the human individual fixates on an image that alienates him from himself" (*Écrits* 92).

I argue that this same Lacanian desire displaced onto a pugnacious language of self-denial in Leopardi and a language of negation that attempts to mediate between truncated bodies in Beckett is not only alienating, and therefore betraying, but also competitive because the subject's internal tension determines " the awakening of his desire for the object of the other's desire" (*Écrits* 92).

3.1.3 Revisiting Levinasian Desire

But the Leopardian and Beckettian subjects are also bent on their being-for-the-Other, and I read this urge for a rupture of being in the desire of the other person as approaching the Levinasian conception of desire. Indeed where Lacan sees aggression and competition, Levinas sees responsibility and obligation. In this perception Levinas is frontally attacking Heidegger's phenomenology in the tradition of hermeneutic philosophy of Being (see 1.5, 2.5). In *Time and the Other* Levinas argues: "sociality in Heidegger is found in the subject alone; . . . Against this collectivity of the side-by-side, I have tried to oppose the 'I-you' collectivity" (93).[147] Levinas audaciously asserts that ethics and alterity ("the Other . . . is what I am not," *Existence and Existents* 98), rather than ontology, is primary: "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power . . . a philosophy of injustice" (*Totality and Infinity* 46). In *Otherwise Than Being* ethical

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[147] Among others who reject the collectivity of the side-by-side in the name of the "I-You" is Jean Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness* part 3, chapter 1). For Levinas, however, Sartre's criticism is inadequate because the "I-you" it proposes remains an antagonistic relationship of two freedoms, a failure of communication.

philosophy is one based on sensibility which in itself leads to signification beyond ontology: "Western philosophy has never doubted the gnoseological, and consequently ontological, structure of signification. To say that in sensibility this structure is secondary, and that sensibility qua vulnerability nonetheless signifies, is to recognize a sense somewhere else than in ontology" (64).

Levinas proposes that only the ethical relation permits us to transcend the isolation and aloneness of Being.[148] He repudiates the Heideggerian notion of being-toward-Death and instead he defines death as the most Other (see 2.5).[149] This idea is in part proposed by Beckett in *Proust* when he claims, "Death has not required us to keep a day free" (*Proust* 17). Through this claim of ethics as first philosophy, Levinas consolidated a far-reaching critique of the Western philosophical tradition, primarily Judeo-Christian philosophy. Leopardi had been among the first to launch an attack on such philosophical tradition. This is testified to in many indices collected in *Trattato delle passioni* and in statements like "convertir la ragione in passione" ("convert rationality to passion"; *Zibaldone* 293,1; my translation).[150] Philosophy according to Levinas−but again this was already the case with Leopardi's attack on the "ragionevolezza di questo secolo" ("reasonableness of this century"; *Zibaldone* 1816, 2; my translation)−is not simply the Greek Sophia–the love of wisdom, but rather, "the wisdom of love at the service of love" (*Otherwise Than Being* 162).[151]

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[148] Derrida has noted that the history of Western philosophy-especially the philosopher Levinas is criticizing here, Heidegger, has not understood existence in this way. Instead, "being is nothing outside the existent, does not precede it; and therefore we simply cannot speak, as Levinas does, of "subordination" because it is not a 'foreign power' or 'hostile neutral force'" (*Writing and Difference* 136).

[149] Levinas says: "It is not the finitude of being that constitutes the essence of time, as Heidegger thinks, but its infinity. The death sentence does not approach as an end of being, but as an unknown, which as such suspends power. The constitution of the interval that liberates being from the limitation of fate calls for death. The nothingness of the interval–a dead time–is the production of infinity…" (*TI* 284).

[150] Leopardi explains the difference in the rationale between a philosophy for the self and a philosophy of love for others: " chi segue il suo odio fa per se, chi l'amore per altrui, chi si vendica giova a se, chi benefica, giova altrui, ne' alcuno è mai tanto infiammato per giovare altrui quanto a se" ("he who follows his own hate does it for himself, he who follows love, does so for others, he who seeks revenge delights in himself, he who does good, delights in others, no one is, however, as inflamed to delight others as himself"; 55,1; my translation).

[151] Levinas' demand of "ethics as first philosophy" is also heavily criticized by, among others, Alain Badiou who says that Levinas' credo is based on a nostalgic, historicist vision of what philosophy should be, namely, an anti-philosophy. Badiou insists that in order to "make explicit the axioms of thought that decide an orientation such as Levinas's: . . . the ethical primacy of the Other over the Same requires that the experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or an essential non-

The wisdom of love opens a path to Levinas' notion of substitution constituted as the foundation of subjectivity, which I construe as foreshadowed by Leopardi's conception of compassion.[152] In Leopardi compassion is possible at the sight of others' effort. Compassion "mette l'anima in una certa azione, e le comunica una certa attività interiore, la rompe ec. L'esercita da lontano ec. E par ch'ella ne ritorni più forte, ed esercitata ec." ("it puts one's soul into action, and it communicates a certain interior activity, it ruptures the soul. It exerts pressure on the soul from a distance. And it seems as if the soul emerges with renewed strength"; *Zibaldone* 2017,3; my translation).

The Levinasian substitution is also prefigured by Schopenhauer's notion of compassion where, despite the fact that it is discovered when desire is stilled, the initiative is towards the other: "for the relationship between . . . egoism and compassion to emerge in any given person, it is not enough for that person to possess wealth and see others in need; he must also know what wealth can do both for himself and for others; the suffering of others must not only present itself, he must also know what suffering is" (1: 321). In Levinasian substitution, the one-for-the-other is prior to any sense of the self, and in the approach–whether it is, as we shall argue, the notion of the face, proximity or the 'Saying'–the other binds, makes responsible, holds hostage.

As introduced in 1.5, desire for the Other is possible for Levinas through metaphysical desire understood, in Lacanian terms, for the Other as wholly other, enigmatic, inaccessible, if not also threatening (*Totality and Infinity* 42-3). Contrary to the long lineage from Leopardi to Lacan whereby desire is primarily characterized by lack, in Levinas desire is contrasted with need and is not a longing for a return to the self: "metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness: the desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it" (*Totality and*

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identity, the traversal of which is the ethical experience itself. But nothing in the simple phenomenon of the other contains such a guarantee. And this simply because the finitude of the other's appearing certainly can be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus lead back to the logic of the Same. The other always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true" (*Ethics* 22-3).

[152] As already mentioned in the introduction, Levinas clearly states that his notion of substitution goes beyond the layman's notion of compassion.

Infinity 34).[153] Starting from the 'I' as 'the same' par excellence, Levinas thus searches for a radically transcendent alterity, which he discovers in the metaphysical and ethical alterity of the face that not only questions the 'I' but arouses it to responsibility.[154] Drawing on Platonic doctrine, in particular the form of the Good (see 1.1), and in a reaction to Enlightenment thought, Levinas abandons the world of free voluntary, self-determining agents for an ethical sphere of dependency and, to a certain extent, susceptibility. Levinas stresses that "to be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me" (*Totality and Infinity* 109). [155] This is an echo of Leopardi's compassion which implies an identification with the suffering subject. The state of being a hostage requires always to have one degree of responsibility more, "the responsibility for the responsibility of the other" (*Totality and Infinity* 109).[156]

The Levinasian subject that emerges from the later work is not simply a subject struggling against totality and towards infinity but also a linguistic subject struggling to put forth his or her responsibility before and behind the system of language / Being that structures her, putting the 'Saying' over and beyond the 'Said' (*Otherwise than Being* 47). This Levinasian desire of the absolutely Other, which is not in the ordinary sense gratifying or desirable, is, in its pure, bruising strangeness, more like the Burkean Sublime than the Beautiful.

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[153] Desire for Levinas aims at the Other, and not, as Socrates would have it, at immortality (*TI* 63). Desire aims at the above-mentioned 'infinity', and not at 'totality'. See 1.5.

[154] As explained in 2.5, while ontology for Levinas promotes freedom and totality, "the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other" (*TI* 42), in metaphysics the other critiques the freedom of the "I." Indeed metaphysics, as Levinas puts it, "discovers the dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology . . . [it] calls into question the exercise of the same" (*TI* 43). Metaphysics as understood by Levinas opens up to infinity. The discovery of the "otherwise than being" is what enables the emergence out of the *Il ya* (see 2.5). Levinas says: "The one in the- one-for-the-other is not a being outside of being, but signification, evacuation of Being's essence for the other. The self is a substitution for the other, subjectivity as a subjection to everything, as a supporting everything and supporting the whole. The incessant murmur of the *there is* strikes with absurdity the active transcendental ego, beginning and present." (*OTB* 164).

[155] ". . . dis-interested," says Levinas, means "disengaged from all participation" (*Totality and Infinity* 109). In an interview Levinas said that the Other is one "who is strange and indifferent to you, who belongs neither to the order of your interest nor to your affections," but "at the same time [he or she] matters to you" (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 48).

[156] Levinas is adamant that the encounter with the Other is primarily "pure communication as the communication of communication." Quoted in Bloechl, *The Face of the Other and the Trace Of God*, 99.

This argument connects once again, as already introduced in 1.2.2, to Schopenhauer, who views the subjective component of the artist's cognition as directly related to the feeling of the Sublime. The rupture of being for-the Other in Levinas thus comes close to offering a Schopenhauerian 'disintegration-of-being' in the artist's cognition of the Sublime. The Levinasian desire, however, is deepened by its centrifugal movement and in rupturing the being it does not disintegrate it but, on the contrary, it inspires it.[157]

3.2 Compassion as *Pietas* to overcome Ataraxia: Desire for the O/other in Leopardi

Desire for Leopardi is primarily a thwarted desire for happiness that intrinsically defines the being in its *bios*: "la felicità che l'uomo naturalmente desidera è una felicità temporale, una felicità materiale" ("the happiness that man naturally desires is a temporal happiness; a material happiness"; *Zibaldone* 3497,1; my translation).[158] It is thus a corporal desire that forever carries the scar of its impossible search for happiness (see 1.2.1). [159]

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[157] H.C. Hutchens, when speaking about the notion of artwork in Levinas says: "The artwork is an Other, or rather, it conjures the Other in an unmediated way that the mind of the viewer cannot fully thematize. This very obscurity of the image uncovers the capacity for exposure to the artwork in pre-originary ways that the mind has not chosen." (*Levinas* 143)

[158] In *Zibaldone* 3497,1 Leopardi states: "L'uomo non desidera la felicità assolutamente, ma la felicità umana . . . Ei la desidera somma e infinita, ma nel suo genere, non infinita in questo senso ch'ella comprenda la felicità del bue, della pianta, dell'Angelo e tutti I generi di felicità ad uno ad uno. Infinita è realmente la sola felicità di Dio. Quanto all'infinità, l'uomo desidera una felicità come la divina, ma quanto all'altre qualità ed al genere di essa felicità, l'uomo non potrebbe già veramente desiderare la felicità di Dio." ("The human being does not desire absolute happiness, but human happiness . . . He desires it in its entirety and infinity, but still specific to the human context; he does not desire its infinity in the sense that it would include the happiness of the bull, the plant, the Angel and all forms of happiness one by one . . . The only really infinite happiness is the happiness of God. As to infinity, the human being desires a happiness that is like the divine one, but as to the other qualities and to the kind of happiness, the human being cannot really desire the happiness of God"; my translation). The implication here is that desire of the infinite, as in Levinas, has to pass through the difficult desire of the finite.

[159] The dictates of the philosophy of Antiquity, essentially based on a direct relationship with nature and a continuous dialogue with transcendence, are the vehicles through which Leopardi re-proposes the continual and essential search for happiness. This ancient essence of life is proximate to the Nietzschean innocence of becoming. This ancient *élan vital* has remained in the collective consciousness as only a memory of past happiness. The Leopardian passions are similar to pulsations from the unconscious and, as already alluded, prefigure Freudian thought. Leopardi will also prefigure Freud in arguing, in the posthumously-collected *Memorie della mia vita,* that psychological conflicts within the individual know their origin in infancy and within the family (1205,1) and also in his argument against the possibility of fully realizing pleasure which

The Leopardian desire for the other person, a difficult kind of desire, is proposed in his reflections when he states: "dopo che l'eroismo è sparito dal mondo, e invece v'è entrato l'universale egoismo, amicizia vera e capace di far sacrificare l'uno amico all'altro, in persone che ancora abbiano interessi e desideri, è ben difficilissima" ("following the disappearance from this world of the heroic ideal, and witnessing instead the ushering in of universal egoism, real friendship capable of self-sacrifice for the other, in human beings who still have interests and desires, is very difficult to find"; *Zibaldone* 104,1; my translation). Desiring the other person is problematic because social relations are at the mercy of the dictates of civilization: "Ne inferirai che dunque l'uomo è fatto per vivere in società. Ma io dico anzi che questa inclinazione o desiderio, benché paia naturale, è un effetto della società" ("You will thus infer that the human being was created in order to live in society. But this inclination or desire, albeit appearing natural, is in effect forged by society"; *Zibaldone* 230,1; my translation). In 3117,1 Leopardi continues to say: "Quindi è che anche nei tempi moderni e civili la compassione non è propria se non degli animi colti e dei naturalmente delicati e sensibili, cioè fini e vivi" ("Thus it is also the case in modern and civil times that compassion is only to be associated with those who are learned, and whose disposition is delicate and sensitive, that is rarefied and alive"; my translation).

As is the case with Levinas, it is thus in the act of being compassionate towards a hostile and threatening other that Leopardi construes magnanimity.[160] The Leopardian

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Freud exposes in *Civilization and its Discontents.* In the posthumous collection *Trattato delle passioni* childhood seems to encompass the strong passions of remorse, hope, guilt, absolution, pain and pleasure which alternate in succession. Leopardian passions aspire to approach the intensity of Antiquity but they are contrasted by the constant attempt of modern man towards rationalization. For assonance between Leopardi and Nietzsche see M.A. Rigoni, *Saggi sul pensiero leopardiano*,78. See also the introduction of C. Galimberti, *Intorno a Leopardi*.

[160]Although on other occasions Leopardi states the very opposite (and this is the case with the citation on the next page), in *Zibaldone* 1724,1 the Italian poet-philosopher says that the capacity to love oneself less in order to love others is found more abundantly in elderly people: "l'amicizia è più facile tra un vecchio o maturo, . . . perché oggi, sparite le illusioni, e non trovandosi più la virtù ne' giovani, I vecchi sono più a portata di amarsi meno, di essere stanchi dell'egoismo perché disingannati del mondo, e quindi di amare gli altri. Perciò è vero che la virtù, come predica Cicerone nel *De amicitia*, è il fondamento dell'amicizia, né può essere amicizia senza virtù, perché la virtù non è altro che il contrario dell'egoismo, principale ostacolo all'amicizia ec.ec.ec." ("Friendship is easier between elderly or mature persons . . . because these days, with the disappearance of illusions, and virtue no longer being a value for the younger generations, elderly

search for the infinite intuited within the finite (see 1.2.1) approaches a similar notion proposed by Levinas. The Levinasian search for the Infinite, however, is redirected towards the other person, in that it is in the suffering imposed by the other that one can detect the sparkle of the Infinite ("the subject as hostage has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but the witnessing of the Infinite"; *Of God who comes to Mind* 73). In Leopardi's later poems attention towards the other is redirected in the full acknowledgement that the sense of the surrounding Infinity is primarily a malevolent force against which humanity is utterly helpless. Below, I first discuss Leopardi's theorization of the desire for the Other conceived as compassion towards the Other. This notion is primarily discussed in *Trattato delle passioni*.[161] I then proceed to an analysis of the above-mentioned poems arguing that while being permeated by a poetic voice that echoes a Lacanian torn subject, the poems are also defined by a poetic 'I' that desires life, which desire consolidates in an almost Levinasian desire for the Other in the final poem "La Ginestra."

It is in its Latin etymological roots *cum* (with) and *pati* ('suffer or bear') that compassion is here understood implying, as in Levinas, transference geared towards the suffering subject. Indeed lamenting the difficulty of relating to and being compassionate towards an egoistic other, betrays a deeply ingrained belief in the value of being-for-the-

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people are capable of less love for themselves, and are tired of selfishness because they are disillusioned with the world, and with love for others. As a result, they are more capable of loving others. Thus it is true that virtue, as Cicero says in *De amicitia,* is at the basis of friendship, nor can there be friendship without virtue, because virtue is nothing but the opposite of selfishness, the primary obstacle to friendship"; my translation).

[161] *Trattato delle passioni* can be located in-between *Manuale di filosofia pratica* and the *Memorie della mia vita*. It is important to point out that these are not treatises as such, but collections of excerpts from *Zibaldone*. In these excerpts there is an almost Levinasian tension between a claim for totality and the search for infinity. This totality might be construed to correspond to the eighteenth-century encyclopedic request as do Leopardi's philological interests, his search for a moral and metaphysical philosophical system, his studies in stylistics and rhetoric and his interest in memory. The search for infinity is found in the Romantic fragment-like quality of Leopardi's ruminations, which gives adequate expression to a modern conscience that contradicts the contents of the Seventeenth century encyclopedic project. Having said this, the general framework of the Leopardian text, composed of fragments which are directed towards an overarching system whereby the encyclopedic thrust of the whole text is transmuted in the different textual threads, is very different from the Romantic thrust of, for instance, the *Athenaeum*. This tension compels one to read Leopardi as Classicist in form but Romantic in sentiment.

Other which is strictly connected to desire and *amor proprio*. Leopardi states that *amor proprio* and compassion go hand in glove:

> Dove maggiormente abbonda l'amor proprio, e dov'egli ha maggior forza, quivi più frequenti e maggiori siano i sacrifizi di se stesso, la compassione, l'abito, l'inclinazione, e gli atti di beneficenza . . . Ond'è che tutto questo debba trovarsi e si trovi infatti maggiore e più frequente ne' giovani, negli antichi, negli uomini sensibili e d'animo vivo, e finalmente negli uomini, i quali hanno, generalmente parlando, maggiore quantità e forza d'amor proprio e minore d'egoismo; di quello che ne' maturi e ne' vecchi, ne' moderni. (*Zibaldone* 3107,1)

> Where there is an abundance of self-love, self-sacrifice, compassion, comportment, inclination and acts of charity are more frequent . . . it is thus the case that all these qualities are to be found in greater abundance and more frequently in young people, in the people of Antiquity, in the sensitive and magnanimous, and finally in the male. All these demonstrate, as a general rule, that they are capable of more self-love and less egoism than the mature, the elderly and modern man. (my translation)

Amor proprio taken to an extreme, on the other hand, impedes the human being from being capable of compassion and freezes him in the Rousseauite *mauvaise honte* (see 2.4.1). In *Trattato delle passioni* Leopardi explores the notion of *mauvaise honte* which characterizes the modern human being who is petrified in his extreme defence from sentiment.[162] To the latter Leopardi annexes the analysis of "timore" ("fear"; 458, 1). Desire here assumes "il coraggio di sostenere la privazione di ogni speranza" ("the courage to endure the deprivation of all hope") and "mirare intrepidamente il deserto

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[162]One of the Romantic images attributed to Leopardi is that of the artist as isolated, lonely, different and other; a cultural trope which many literary figures and fictional characters helped to create: from Byron to Baudelaire and from Coleridge to Nietzsche. The myth of the Romantic artist has attracted conspicuous critical attention. See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, and M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition.* Levinas once more takes up the thread of solitude, emphasizing virility, pride and sovereignty, as opposed to the existentialist notion of solitude as despair and abandonment. Even though the existent's solitude turns out to be insufficient (see Winnie of *Happy Days* in 3.4) and inferior to ethical-social life, Levinas emphasizes that the existent ought not to be understood in terms of what it lacks (*Time and the Other* 55).

della vita" ("to look intrepidly at the desertification of life"; "Dialogo di Tristano e un amico" in *Operette Morali* 488-89). This is a desire which transmutes dianoetic laughter to an inner state of being (see 4.1).[163]

Compassion in Leopardi, however, is counterpoised to the *mauvaise honte* and to *atarassia* 'ataraxia' (see 2.2.1; 2.4.2), which in *Zibaldone* 65,1 is still suggested as the remedy to human misery. In 196,1, however, 'ataraxia' is debunked in favour of compassion as *pietas.* Here Leopardi underscores the importance of "provvedere per parte nostra alla conservazione di 'tutto il buono' " ("we need to attend to the preservation of everything that is good"; *Zibaldone* 519,1; my translation). The poet-philosopher states: "la debolezza in quanto tale comporta la compassione, che può trasformarsi dalla *pietas* in amore" ("Weakness as such brings about compassion, which can be transformed from *pietas* to love"; *Zibaldone* 211, 1; my translation). Leopardi also points out that being amiable evokes compassion (*Zibaldone* 220,3), whereby the emphasis is on the weakness of the subject whose suffering is foiled. In *Della natura degli uomini e delle cose* Leopardi proposes that individuals be interdependent, where compassion for the other specifically springs in the strong at the sight of the weak who, however, are callous and insufferable: "la compassionevolezza natural ai forti, e la natural immisericordia e durezza dei deboli" ("compassion comes natural to the strong, and the natural lack of mercy and dourness is intrinsic to the weak"; *Zibaldone* 3271, 1; my translation). Compassion here entails that the strong subject is morally obliged to shoulder responsibility: "Il soffrire con pazienza e magnanimità, è indizio sicuro di coraggio e d'anima sublime; e l'abusare della propria forza è segno di codarda ferocia"

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[163] It is in the same *Trattato delle passioni* that passions are portrayed as elusive to the tight hold of rationality and thus to the straightjacket into which eighteenth-century treatises attempted to fit them; passions are in these excerpts in a constant dialectic with *virtù*: "Speranza" (hope) is thus in dialectic with "desiderio" (desire) (see 1.2.1). The dichotomy between rationality and passions coincides with Leopardi's reflections in *Preambolo del volgarizzatore* (which precedes his translation of the *Manuale di Epitteto "Manual of Epitectus"*), where he speaks about the necessity of Stoic philosophy (see 2.2.1). The necessity of a philosophy that defends the weak by conquering one's passions is, nonetheless, slowly discarded for a philosophy that, on the contrary, imbues reason with passion. After reading the excerpts in *Trattato delle passioni* the over-all impression that emerges is that Leopardi seems to be bent on an anti-*Epitectian* stance. He later defines a model that increasingly distances itself from *Epitectian* virility and comes closer to what he terms a feminine ideal. It is interesting to note that Levinas will similarly identify in the figure of the female, particularly the mother in *Otherwise than Being*, the foundational mode of the subject's being-for-the-other (1.5).

("enduring suffering with patience and magnanimity is a clear sign of courage and a sublime soul; abusing one's strength is a sign of utter cowardice"; *Zibaldone* 940,2; my translation). In *Trattato delle passioni* and *Manuale di filosofia pratica* Leopardi specifically focuses on the other as a weak subject (*Zibaldone* 281,1) arguing that compassion "nasce nell'animo nostro alla vista di uno che soffre . . . in quel punto ci fa provare un sentimento affatto indipendente dal nostro vantaggio o piacere, e tutto relativo agli altri" ("is born in our soul at the sight of one who suffers . . . at that point it compels a feeling which is anything but extraneous to our vantage point or pleasure, and conceived entirely in relation to other people"; *Zibaldone* 108, 1; my translation).

Nonetheless, compassion in Leopardi is not entirely free of egoism given that all Leopardian passions derive from *amor proprio*. Although the poet-philosopher does claim the opposite on various occasions, he also considers the act of compassion as "atto d'orgoglio che l'uomo fa tra se stesso" ("an act of pride that the human being does in relation to himself"; 3107, 1; my translation).[164] Compassion is thus not always linked to *pietas* but is also attributed to pride while being simultaneously and inextricably linked to "speranza" (hope). As Leopardi explicitly states: "chi ha perduto la speranza d'essere felice, non può pensare alla felicità degli altri, perché l'uomo non può cercarla che per rispetto alla propria. Non può dunque neppure interessarsi dell'altrui infelicità" ("he who has lost hope of happiness, cannot think about others' happiness, because the human being cannot seek happiness unless it is in relation to his own; he thus cannot take an interest in other people's unhappiness either"; *Zibaldone* 1589, 1; my translation).[165]

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[164] Suffice it to quote "la compassione, la quale io dico che è l'unica qualità e passione umana che non abbia nessunissima mescolanza di *amor proprio*" ("Compassion is, in my view, the only human quality and passion which is not in any way intermixed with self-love"; *Zibaldone* 108,1; my translation). In 3271,1 Leopardi states: "Quanto più l'uomo è in istato di esser soggetto di compassione, o di bramarla, o di esigerla, e quanto più egli la brama o l'esige, anche a torto, e si persuade di meritarla, tanto meno egli compatisce," ("The more the human being is subject to compassion, or the more he craves or expects compassion, even undeservingly, the more he convinces himself of deserving it, and the less is he able of being compassionate"; my translation).

[165] It is indeed in Antiquity and in childhood, which in its extreme naturalness is closer to the intensity of Ancient passions and thus closer to the unconscious and farthest from rationality, that the nexus between the above-mentioned "speranza" (hope), and "timore" (fear), is strongest (*Zibaldone* 458,1). This is dealt with at length by thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza. In Leopardi this link is found in the desire to desire life and thus in the desire for illusions (*Zibaldone* 66, 2). The lack of illusions that Leopardi sees as a distinctive characteristic of modern society is at the root of the lack of "*Vigore Corporale*" (Physical Vigour). In 130,2 Leopardi describes the dearth of "*Vigore Corporale*" that characterizes the modern

Compassione is for Leopardi, as for Schopenhauer, the only real love (see introduction) because it is the only human quality that can, even in the presence of *amor proprio*, rise above self-interest. The Leopardian compassion towards the other, a quality that is severed from its Christian connotation, is the passion that guarantees the involvement that, for instance, Stoic philosophy negates (see 2.2.1).[166] In *Trattato delle passioni* Leopardi launches a veritable attack against the indifference and ataraxia recommended by Epictectus in the presence of others' dredging suffering (see 2.3.1), dubbing this attitude "irriflessione bestiale" ("a bestial kind of lack of reflection"; *Zibaldone* 196,1; my translation). Leopardi, like Schopenhauer and Levinas, affirms the value and the necessity of participating in others' suffering.

Compassion in Leopardi is thus the sentiment that can counter the impenetrability of stultified social relations which put all faith in the aforementioned "ragionevolezza del secolo" ("rationality of the century"). Despite underlining the ubiquitous Machiavellism of modern society, and indirectly the otherness of the Other, Leopardi alerts his readers to seek communication with *l'altro* (the other) in that only compassion can make human suffering sufferable. To a degree, Leopardi conceives the role of the rejected individual in his contemporary society as one that comes close to the sacrificial scapegoat who "suffers in order to relieve others from suffering" (Veronese 1000), thus coming close to the Levinasian notion of substitution. Compassion for Leopardi intensifies in proportion to

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human being, as the motive behind lack of Action, thus lack of moral involvement in praxis, provoking what he conceives at this point (in June 1820) as the coring out of all virility in the modern human being. On the 19th of January 1828 Leopardi explicitly links desire to hope: "La privazione di ogni speranza, succeduta al mio primo ingresso nel mondo, appoco appoco fu causa di spegnere in me quasi ogni desiderio. Ora, per le circostanze mutate, risorta la speranza, io mi trovo nella strana situazione di aver più speranza che desiderio, e più speranze che desiderii ecc.." ("The deprivation of any hope, which followed my initiation into this world, slowly put out in me almost every shred of desire. At this point, because of the changed circumstances, and with resurfaced hope, I find myself in the strange situation of having more hope than desire, and more things to hope for than to desire"; *Zibaldone* 105-108; my translation).
[166] By considering compassion "un miracolo della natura" ("a miracle of nature"), however, Leopardi disassociates this feeling from the specific religious and Christian context. In disassociating compassion from any specific moral value, Leopardi differs from Levinas.

the guiltlessness and powerlessness of the sufferer, which is why Torquato Tasso's miseries made him a strong object of sympathy in Leopardi's eyes.[167]

It is to Leopardi's later poetry that I would now like to turn in order to analyze the dichotomy between the Leopardian poetic "I" as a Lacanian torn subject endlessly longing for an impossible desire, and the fighting spirit for life which, by the time the reader gets to "La Ginestra," is a subject ruptured as a being-for-the-Other capable of unique compassion. The poems I will briefly refer to are "Alla sua donna," "Il Passero solitario," "Il Risorgimento," "A Silvia," "Le Ricordanze," and " Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell' Asia." These references pave the way for an analysis of: "Il Pensiero dominante," "Amore e Morte," "A se stesso," "Aspasia," and finally "La Ginestra." I argue that in these later poems the poetic 'I''s verbal symbolization can be seen as an obligation to express, a desire inscribed in the 'I''s speech which delineates a futile longing to recuperate a lost symbiosis. Desire distorts Leopardi's poetic 'I''s language and prevents it from reconciling with itself, trapping it in its infinite movement. Nonetheless, while being permeated by the surrender to life's endless pain, these poems are also defined by a combative spirit that desires life nonetheless, a desire that in "La Ginestra" becomes the capacity to be uniquely compassionate towards the other.

It is in the same ability to be compassionate that the themes of isolation and solitude are turned into Leopardian poetic subjects. Indeed compassion is for Leopardi a highly poetic feeling because it soothes by giving pleasure. The therapeutic experience of being for the other in Leopardi shifts from being ascetic to becoming aesthetic. For this purpose, I shall first examine the struggle at the core of which are entangled the desire to articulate life and the restraint from this desire in the mostly post-1828 *canti*. In these poems Leopardi's subject confronts the frightening but real negative metaphysics taking stock of the fact that the human being is at the mercy of the desire of life, or as Nietzsche would put it, the will to power.

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[167] Torquato Tasso (March 11, 1544 – April 25, 1595) was an Italian poet of the 16th century, best known for his poem *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (1580).

The infinite movement of desire already traverses "Alla sua donna" (1823) which sounds out Leopardi's newfound poetic voice and evokes that something within the human which recalls the Levinasian desire of an infinite that lies beyond. In the early Levinas, as in Leopardi's "Alla sua donna," the hint of the infinite within the finite is intuited in the female figure and has a long tradition which goes back to Plato and passes through courtly love poetry, the *Stilnovisti*, Dante and Petrarch among others.[168] In "Alla sua donna," the desire of the infinite intuited in the female–"Se dell'eterne idee / L'una sei tu, cui di sensibil forma / Sdegni l'eterno senno esser vestita" ("Whether you are the one and only / eternal idea that eternal wisdom / disdains to see arrayed in sensible form"; lines 45-47)–is pitted against the diminishing desire that is palpably felt throughout the poem, where the poetic I often laments the "perduti desiri, e la perduta / Speme de' giorni miei" ("lost desires, / my life's lost hope"; lines 39-40).

"Il Passero solitario" is similarly epitomized by Fernando Figurelli as a poem informed by the "nostalgia di un bene che egli [Leopardi] ama perdutamente e tuttavia non sa né può godere" ("nostalgia of a good thing that he [Leopardi] desperately loves but which nonetheless he has not come to know or enjoy"; 113; my translation).[169] Against Figurelli's claim, I emphasize the poetic voice's willingness to enjoy life, the desire to life that is ultimately inextinguishable. The speaking 'I' in "Il Passero solitario," as other poems written by Leopardi at this time, is traversed both by loss and renunciation: "la beata gioventù vien meno" ("blessed youth is failing, too"; line 44 in *Canti* 103) and verbs that denote escaping the desire for pleasure; "schivi," ("shun"), "non curo,"("I take no notice of"), "fuggo lontano,"("run away"), "indugio" ("put off"). The latter are, however, counterpoised to nouns connoting desire of life itself: "allegria," ("happiness"), "sollazzo e riso," ("delight and laughter"), and "diletto e gioco" ("pleasure and enjoyment").

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[168]In his philosophy of love, Plato, and those directly following this Platonic credo, left to the feminine no other role than that of furnishing an example of the Idea, which alone can be the object of love. Levinas, I argue below, opposes what he conceives as Plato's reduction of the feminine to matter because he claims that in this manner "the whole particularity of the relationship of one to another goes unnoticed" (*Time and the Other* 93). Leopardi will also repeatedly renounce Platonic Ideas.

In "Il Risorgimento" (1828) an equally bellicose poetic voice, the "virtù nova" ("new power"; line 83), fights against a poetic "I' that laments a move to a decimation of desire; "duro mio sopor" ("my cruel sleep"; line 64) and a closure of sentiment: "Il cor non mi feri" ("he couldn't break into my heart"; line 48), where a split poetic voice that recalls the Lacanian subject split into "*je*" and "*moi*," revisits the paradoxically infinite nature of human desire. The struggle is between the unconscious subject, which the poetic voice addresses, and the conscious subject, the poetic I itself, the former at one point nearing an impossible demand for entropy: "Desiderato il termine / Avrei del viver mio; Ma spento era il desio / nello spossato sen" ("I could have wanted / my life to end then, / except desire had died / in my powerless heart"; lines 69-72). Towards the end of the poem, however, the breached poetic 'I' is comforted and awakened by the "ardor natio" ("my own fire"; line 150). This is the same desire of life expressed in "Dialogo di Plotino e Porfirio": "la persona, quantunque ben cognoscente e persuasa della verità, nondimeno a mal grado della ragione, e perseveri nella vita, e proceda in essa come fanno gli altri perché quel tal senso (si può dire) e non l'intelletto, è quello che ci governa" ("although one may be quite knowledgeable and persuaded of the truth, it is enough for him to continue with life, in spite of reason, and to proceed in it just like everyone else; for we can say that that sense, and not the intellect, is what rules us"; *Operette morali* 472-73).

In "A Silvia" the interminable movement of desire is, once more, woven through the poem and this is one of the many clear instances where Leopardi's so called nihilism is revealed not to run deep enough to touch the well spring of his poetry. In "A Silvia" the longing for a perfectly blissful past: "rimembri ancora" ("do you remember still"; line 1), idealized by being sifted through memory, as reveal phrases in the superlative like: "Quando beltà splendea negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi" ("when beauty shimmered / in your smiling, startled eyes"; lines 3-4), imbues the whole poem. In the *Zibaldone* Leopardi explains how the past is often idealized through the tricks played by memory: "è assai più dolce il ricordarsi del bene (non mai provato, ma che in lontananza sembra di aver provato) che il goderne" ("it is far sweeter to think back on something good, but that was never really experienced, albeit it seems so when perceived from afar, rather than deriving direct pleasure from it" (1044,2; my translation; see 1.2.1). The desire for the

Other, in the form of an elusive youthfulness represented in the image of Silvia, is also a desire for a wholesomeness that is by now withered: "l'erbe inaridisse il verno," ("winter had withered the grass"; line 40), to which are attributed adjectives like "acerbo e sconsolato" ("bitter, inconsolable"; line 34). The language of the poetic I in "A Silvia" strives to realize the desire for the wholeness of the past. It only succeeds, however, in snatching away what could be perceived as a Lacanian torn subject, from the grasp of a past that, not only is no longer, but that never was. The lamented bliss of the past is revealed to be a youth of "sudate carte" ("labored pages"; line 16), the idealization of which has been sustained through mere illusions. Concomitantly, however, the split poetic 'I' is caught in the infinitely cyclical desire. In the lament of the "cara compagna dell'eta' mia nova" ("dear companion of my innocence"; line 54), and the ensuing elegiac tone, the desire for what was, or what was thought to be whole and pure, never ceases.

In "Le Ricordanze" the poetic speaking subject cannot grasp its unconscious desires and frustrations in a complete manner and the repeated use of statements in the negative, starting from the first line "io non credea," ("I never thought") points towards the elusiveness of the poetic I's attempt. A dark shadow keeps being recast on remembrances, "le ricordanze," by the negative statements of the poetic 'I' who speaks of a past– "Di contenti, d'angosce e di desio" ("of happiness and anguish and desire"; line 105), "l'esser vissuto indarno" ("that I lived in vain"; line 102)–and recalls, in another Leopardian quotation which Beckett echoes, "dolorosamente / alla fioca lucerna poetando" ("miserably / writing poetry by my faint lantern"; 114-5).[170] Nonetheless, the nostalgic lament "e intanto vola/ Il caro tempo giovanil" ("And all the while / youth's beloved moment flies"; lines 43-44) is as forceful as the vociferous voicing of the present predicament: "Qui passo gli anni abbandonato, occulto. Senz'amor, senza vita" ("I spend my years secluded here, shut in, with no love and no life"; line 38-39). On the one hand there is the wish to recognize the full implication of the poetic I's lament. On the other is the poetic voice's longing to cancel its present existence and recoil from its own words:

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[170] In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (18) Belacqua cites, and modifies, a line from Leopardi's "Le Ricordanze." Instead of "alla fioca lucerna poetando," and in reaction to Smeraldina's advances, he says: "alla fioca lucerna leggendo Meredith" ("by my faint lantern reading Meredith"; my translation).

"Qui di pietà mi spoglio e di virtudi. E sprezzator degli uomini mi rendo" ("I strip myself of gentleness and kindness, / becoming someone who despises men"; lines 41-42). In this discourse the wish to come to an end is identical with the determination not to give up. The "van desio" ("vain desire"; line 59), which becomes "mero desio" ("mere wishes"; line 83) thus follows a paradoxical symmetry of cancellation and recognition which recalls Lacan's earlier quoted expression that not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing. Desire is repressed beyond recognition but it continuously repeats itself and haunts the poetic voice's present: "tu passasti, eterno sospiro mio: passasti e fia compagna d'ogni mio vago immaginar" ("You're gone, / lifelong regret of mine, you're gone; and the bitter memory will last"; lines 169-71).

In "Canto notturno di un Pastore errante dell'Asia" (1829-30), the poetic I addresses the moon in an effort to come to terms with the passing of time through the alienating flux of words: "di tanto adoprar, di tanti moti" ("all these works and all this movement"; line 93). Words, however, seem unable to capture "del tacito, infinito andar del tempo" ("the silent, endless pace of time" line 72), and increasingly move the poetic 'I' away from any grasping of assumed meaning. The rhetorical questions seek less to obtain hard-and-fast rules of signification than they attempt to sound out their infinitesimal insignificance: "Che fa l'aria infinita, e quel profondo / Infinito seren? Che vuol dir questa / Solitudine immensa ed io che sono?" ("What does the endless air do, and that deep / eternal blue? What is the meaning of / this huge solitude? And what am I?" lines 87-89). As will be the case in "La Ginestra," the human being is frail "frale" (line 102) but s/he does not cease to desire, even a desire to desire the other in vain: "Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero" ("imagining the destinies of others"; line 140).

The above-mentioned poems clear the path for the movement of desire expressed in the *ciclo d'Aspasia*: primarily in the poems "Il Pensiero dominante," "Amore e Morte," "A se stesso," and "Aspasia."

In "Il Pensiero dominante" the oxymoronic dominant but sweet fixation: "Dolcissimo possente Dominator" ("Sweetest, potent lord"; lines 1-2) holds the poetic 'I' hostage. This fixation could be compared to an unfulfilled desire for the Other which,

however, has the power to elevate the spirit: "Di qual mia seria cura ultimo obbietto / Non fosti tu?" ("what has the last object of my interest / been, if not you?; lines 137-38). This Leopardian Other is as elusive and fictitious as the Lacanian one and its Stilnovistic ascendancy renders eloquent and adept what is crucial to Lacan- the fictivity of woman at the heart of courtly love poetry: "torre/ In solitario campo, Tu stai solo, gigante, in mezzo a lei" ("Like a tower in an empty field, / you stand alone, gigantic, in my thinking"; lines 19-20). In this poem the palpable desire for life permeates the verses not in spite of, but rather because of the desire for the Other: "Pregio non ha, non ha ragion la vita / Se non per lui, per lui ch'all' uomo è tutto" ("Life has no worth, no reason / but this, which is everything to man"; lines 80-1). The endlessness and irrepressible nature of this desire is also the poetic voice's wish to find reconciliation with life and thus with itself. This desire is seen as the only justification: "discolpa" ("exculpates"; line 82) for human life defined as "tanto patir senz' altro frutto" ("to suffer so much for no other reason"; line 84). The poetic voice's quest for detachment from the cruel and base outside world is not merely a quest for self-sufficiency. Rather it is associated with the desire for the Other which also highlights the irreducible gap between the desire for recognition and the recognition of desire: "al cor non vile / La vita della morte è più gentile" ("the valiant heart, / can life be more beautiful than death"; lines 86-7). The painful desire for the Other is an illusion: "palese error" ("patent error"; line 111). It is, however, also a form of resistance, "Che incontro al ver tenacemente dura" ("that you hold up against the truth"; line 114).

In "Amore e Morte," desire for love is presented at its juncture with desire for death, both considered in this poem as the most desirable aspects of human life: "Amore e Morte / Ingenerò la sorte / Cose quaggiù si belle / Altre il mondo non ha, non han le stelle" ("two siblings, Love and Death. / No other thing as beautiful / exists down here, or in the stars above"; lines 1-4). The rich fervour of life can also be seen through the desire for death, just as in "Dialogo d'Ercole e di Atlante," the rich fervour of life on earth is accentuated through its being reduced to an affair of mechanics. The paradoxical striving for two mutually exclusive goals recalls once more Lacan's statement: "Man's very desire is constituted . . . under the sign of mediation: it is the desire to have one's desire recognized. Its object is a desire, that of other people, in the sense that man has no object

that is constituted for his desire without some mediation" (*Écrits* 148). Desire for life, the Leopardian "amoroso affetto" ("a loving feeling"; line 29) and desire for death, the "fier disio" ("fierce desire"; line 43) are two sides of the same coin as Freud would argue in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and as Lacan would flesh out in his distinction between demand and desire. The desire of death in this poem almost prefigures Lacanian *moi*'s desire for fusion manifesting itself in an underlying death wish which remains unfulfilled. Desire for death is here taken a step further in that it does not simply reflect the futile quest that is the nature of human desire but it is also elevated to become an act of magnanimity: "la gentilezza del morir" (" death's gentleness"; line 73).

In "A se stesso", the same poem Beckett repeatedly quotes in *Proust* (see 1.1), the cleaved 'I' is even more pronounced, and in that split the poetic voice is, in a more accentuated manner than in the above-mentioned poems, in conflict. Nothing in the *Canti* has been seen as so starkly desolate as the epitaphic "A se stesso," in which Leopardi, announcing the death of hope and desire, commands his heart to stop beating (Perella 370). In this poem the poetic 'I' is an Other to itself and in this sense is Lacanian through and through. In this conflict which echoes the master-slave dialectic lies the poetic I's subjection and attempt to resume control over the Other. The poetic 'I,' however, both desires and recoils from this Other, in this case the Other being the repository of sentiment, a source of acute pain and suffering: "perì l'inganno estremo / ch'eterno io mi credei. Perì" ("The ultimate illusion / that I thought was eternal died. It died" lines 2-3). The attempt to eliminate the Other is perceived at the level óf the poetic I's utterances which oscillate between "io" ('I') and "noi" ('we') when lamenting a desire that is no longer. The presence of words here, as in the *fort/da* game, is inextricably bound up with an absence: "Non val cosa nessuna / I moti tuoi" ("Nothing deserves your throbbing, nor is earth / worth sighing over"; lines 7-8). Words are uttered forcefully but seem powerless in the face of an infinitely malevolent universe. In "A se stesso" the poetic voice's effort at, and resignation over, coming to terms with its own utterances, and its own suffering, can be equated, from a Lacanian perspective, to an apparently futile desire for the Other.

From the outset the poetic 'I' immediately attempts to assume the lead over the Other in an urge to acquiesce suffering: "Or poserai per sempre/ Stanco mio cor" ("Now

you'll rest forever, / worn-out heart"; lines 1-2) and "posa per sempre. Assai/ palpitasti" ("Be still forever. / You have beaten long enough"; lines 6-7). But the soothing hushing tones blend in with the harshness of a poetic voice that has turned dour and cynical in an urge to totally eliminate the Other as reveals the repetition of absolute words; "per sempre" ("forever"; line 1), "estremo" ("ultimate"; line 2), "per sempre" ("forever"; line 6), "mai" ("never"; line 10), "l'ultimo" ('last'; line 12) and "l'infinita" ("boundless"; line 16). The mercilessness of the poetic I's predicament, expressed in yet another turn of phrase echoed by Beckett (see 1.1) is clear enough: "Amore e noia/ La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango e' il mondo" ("Life is only / bitterness and boredom, and the world is filth"; lines 9-10). Thus, on the one hand, is the poetic I's unremitting failure to detach itself from life: "disprezza/ Te, la natura, il brutto/ Poter che, ascoso, a comun danno impera, / E l'infinita vanità del tutto" ("Disdain yourself now, nature, the brute / hidden power that rules to common harm, / and the boundless vanity of all"; lines 13-16); on the other hand is the repetitious circle in which the mind is bound to move and keep revisiting "l'inganno estremo" ("the ultimate illusion"; line 2). Once more, this two-way movement corresponds to Lacan's already-quoted expression that not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing. It is an insatiable desire, a seeking without a finding that both underlines and undermines desire. The "inganno estremo" will never cease haunting and this is also the case in "Aspasia."

In this poem the poetic voice is lacerated by the bitter and not entirely graspable memories of the Other, in this case the evanescent image of Aspasia, who ubiquitously invades the present: "Al dì sereno, alle tacenti stelle" ("on a clear day, / under the silent stars"; line 5). These memories crowd the voice's consciousness rendering this frustrated desire ineffable. Indeed words are here more akin to ghostly presences: "come cara larva, ad ora, ad ora / Tornar costuma e disparir" ("as a cherished shade, / she now and then returns, and disappears"; lines 73-4). Once more the presence of words is inextricably bound up with an absence. The Other here is an "eccelsa imago" ("high ideal"; line 48) who, unlike in "Alla sua donna," is a source of frustration for the poetic voice who has to come to terms with its material fiction. The desire for unification with this "superba vision" ("exalted vision"; line 8), must resign itself to the unattainability of this end and to the realization that the Other is indeed fictitious: "perch'io te non amai, ma quella Diva

/ Che già vita, or sepolcro, ha nel mio core" ("because it wasn't you I loved, but the Goddess / who lived once but now is buried in my heart"; line 78-79). At the end of this poem, however, albeit describing itself as "neghittoso" (deprived of desire), the poetic voice releases its deep-seated and thwarted desire for life in a smile. This is the same Leopardian smile explored in chapter four, a smile that admits the insignificance of human life while it concomitantly braces to face it. This is a smile that in its dianoetic power reveals its capacity for compassion towards human frailty.

The theme of compassion becomes central in "La Ginestra" (1836) particularly in the famous third 'solidarity stanza'[171] which has been the focus of critical debate since the studies published in 1947 by Walter Binni and Cesare Luporini. If the content of Leopardi's early poetry is the ideal ('idilli'), the content of the late poetry is seen as devoid of the ideal. Binni highlights the poetical quality of these analytical later works and calls this way of writing poetry "la tendenza antidillica" ("the anti-idyllic tendency"; my translation) which was to find its apotheosis in "La Ginestra" (163). Binni construes a moral and heroic commitment, a social message, in this specific poem. Luporini goes a step further in that he sees in this poem a concretely progressive attitude which he interprets as developing out of Leopardi's materialism. Luporini cites several passages where Leopardi praises activity and he infers, perhaps overstating his case, that this activity is of a social and political nature and can aid in weakening the selfishness of the individual. This type of criticism has been very popular with scholars of a Marxist stamp. Timpanaro, in "Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi," attempted to reduce the emphasis on the progressive aspect of Leopardi's thought. According to Timpanaro, Leopardi's progressivism is always at war with his pessimistic streak (152). More than a social protest, Leopardi's protest is subjective and openly attacks the injustice of physical inequalities (155). Timpanaro goes on to say that Leopardi was a materialist of the eighteenth century and his materialism in philosophy was not accompanied by progressivism in politics. While the 'solidarity stanza' has thus been primarily read in a social and political context,[172] I am here proposing a Levinasian reading to shed light on

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[171] See Williams, "Leopardi's Philosophy of Consolation in 'La Ginestra,'" 985-96.
[172] See Nino Borsellino, *Il Socialismo della 'Ginestra'. Poesia e poetiche leopardiane*. Poggibonsi: Lalli, 1990; Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Classicismo e Illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano*. 2nd edn. Pisa: Nistri

the notion of the desire of the other person conceived in the ability to be compassionate towards the other, which Leopardi theorizes at length in the excerpts of *Trattato delle passioni*.[173]

In "La Ginestra" I read a nearly doomed desire for life expressed by the broom flower's ("ginestra") humble act of bending down: "piegherai / Sotto il fascio mortal non renitente / il tuo capo innocente" ("unresisting, / you'll bow your blameless head / under the deadly scythe"; lines 304-06). This humble act of sympathy is redirected towards the other person's suffering: "O fior gentile, e quasi / I Danni altrui commiserando" ("noble flower / . . ., as if sharing in the pain of others"; lines 34-35).

I read the compassion towards the other in "La Ginestra" as Levinasian in the way it redirects towards the other person that same human attention that proves impossibly feeble when directed towards an immensely powerful Infinite. While in Levinas this thwarted search is redirected towards the other, admitting man's endless desire of the Infinite detected in the other's suffering, in "La Ginestra" directing desire towards the other is carried out in the full acknowledgment that the surrounding sense of the Infinite found in nature is Sublime and malevolent. Against the Leopardian Sublime universe the human being is utterly powerless: "dell'uman seme / Cui la dura nutrice, ou' ei men teme / Con lieve moto in un momento annulla" ("their cruel nurse, / when they fear it least, / with the slightest movement in a moment / partly destroys"; lines 43-45).

Lischi, 1969; Alfredo Bonadeo, "Dalle *Operette Morali* alla Ginestra: desiderio, felicita' e morte." *Rivista di studi italiani* 10:2 (1992) 1-21; Franco Ferrucci, "Memoria letteraria e memoria cosmica: Il caso della Ginesta" *Lettere italiane* 42 (1990), 363-73: Giuseppe Genco, "Dall' eroe del mito all' uomo povero di stato: gli umili nella poesia di Leopardi," *Otto/Novecento* 19 (1995), 173-83. Another important critical work in this tradition is the essay by Dolfi. Departing from Binni's interpretation of "La Ginestra," Dolfi sees the poetic voice's refusal to hope as the negative moment which will allow the rise of utopia (33).

[173] The combative spirit of the poem primarily reacts to the Empiricists who, about fifty years before Leopardi's time, had professed to do away with all the "intellectual sophistry and illusion" of metaphysics and theology. David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* ends with a dramatic debunking of false metaphysics: "If we take in our hand any volume: of divinity or school metaphysics for instance; let us ask, 'Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion," 165.

The inextinguishable desire that ineluctably seeks its satisfaction through human endeavour ultimately redirects attention towards the discovery of one's ability to be compassionate: "Ed alle offese / Dell'uomo armar la destra, e laccio porre / Al vicino ed inciampo/ Stolto crede cosi qual fora in campo / Cinto d'oste contraria," ("But to take up arms / against a man, or set a trap / or make trouble for his neighbour / seems to him as stupid as, / surrounded by hostile soldiers"; lines 135-39). This infinite movement of desire here takes place in the presence of the "fiera compiacenza" of not being deceived, whereby one "con franca lingua, / Nulla al ver detraendo, / Confessa il mal che ci fu dato in sorte" ("with honest words / that subtract nothing from the truth, / admits the pain that is our destiny"; lines 114-116). As Tristano claims in "Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico":

> Calpesto la vigliaccheria degli uomini, rifiuto ogni consolazione e ogn'inganno puerile, . . . ed accett[o] tutte le conseguenze di una filosofia dolorosa, ma vera. La quale se non è utile ad altro, procura agli uomini forti la fiera compiacenza di vedere strappato ogni manto alla coperta e misteriosa crudeltà del destino umano. (*Operette morali* 488-89)

> I despise the cowardice of men; I reject all consolations and all childish deceptions . . . and . . . accept all the consequences of a philosophy that is painful but true‒which philosophy, if not beneficial to anything else, at least provides strong men with the fierce satisfaction of seeing every mask torn from the hidden and mysterious cruelty of human destiny. (my translation)

In "La Ginestra" this "misteriosa crudeltà del destino umano" is a Sublime Infinite power represented by the Vesuvius, the haunting skyscape and the apple that falls and crushes the ants beneath. In the initial stanza, the poetic 'I' addresses the "Odorata ginestra" ("scented broom"; line 6), the only thing that survives on the desolate slopes of the "sterminator Vesevo" ("Vesuvius the destroyer"; line 3). The broom flower is: "Di tristi / Lochi e dal mondo abbandonati amante, / E d'afflitte fortune ognor compagna" ("lover of sad places that the world has left / and constant friend of fallen greatness"; lines 14-16). The contemplation of this infinite power of the Vesuvius brings about reflection about the

futility of the infinite human endeavour: "A queste piagge/ Venga colui che d'esaltar con lode / Il nostro stato ha in uso, e vegga quanto / È il gener nostro in cura / All'amante natura" ("Let him who loves to praise our state / come to these slopes and see how well our kind / is served by loving nature"; lines 37-41).

Facing up to the superior infinite force of Nature (lines 97-110) is only possible by admitting the futile human striving and redirecting that striving towards mutual compassion: "porgendo / Valida e pronta ed aspettando aita / Negli alterni perigli e nelle angosce / Della Guerra comune" ("offering / and expecting real and ready aid / in the alternating dangers and concerns / of our common struggle"; lines 132-35). Compassion has a similar end in Leopardi as in Levinas but in the latter the infinite superior force is distinctly metaphysical and it is the impossible human desire of this Infinity that is redirected in compassion towards the other person. In Levinas compassion is ultimately indicative of the human inability to directly achieve the Infinite, while in Leopardi compassion results from admitting the insignificance and helplessness of human life in the face of *physis*: "granel di sabbia, il qual di terra ha nome" ("mere grain of sand called earth" line 191). As in the Stoic ethics of Epitectus, the suggestion is to strive for the good-of-the-other, but unlike the Epitectian case, faith should not be entirely put in rationality because: "la filosofia, sperando e promettendo a principio di medicare I nostri mali, in ultimo si riduce a desiderare invano di rimediare a se stessa" ("In short, philosophy starts out by hoping and promising to cure our ills and ends up by desiring in vain to find a remedy for itself"; "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" 412-3). Desiring the good of-the-other as envisaged in "La Ginestra" is thus a consolation for what Beckett would define as the "vain longing that vain longing go" (*Worstward Ho* 481, see 2.1) and thus the futility, albeit a necessary futility, of the desire of life itself.

The use of the Biblical epigraph "E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce,"[174] could refer to a life without desire for illusions and without reference to anything that goes beyond the material and tangible largely made possible during the

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[174] As a matter of fact Leopardi turns John's words upside down. John says: "E gli uomini vollero la luce piuttosto che le tenebre". This is an interesting move on Leopardi's part in that he deliberately turns John's words on their head implicating that human beings painted themselves in a corner by resorting to rationality at all costs.

Enlightenment. Leopardi's opposition to such excessive concentration on rationality and pragmatism, as is also the case with his disagreement with another popular creed of his century−utilitarianism–is succinctly expressed by Tristano's memorable phrase: "gl'individui sono spariti dinanzi alle masse" ("Individuals have disappeared before the masses"; *Operette Morali* 496-97). This quotation once more foreshadows Levinasian thought, specifically Levinas' attack on totality as opposed to infinity. As in Levinas, the foundation of desiring the good-of-the-other in Leopardi is each individual's capacity for suffering. In this sense Leopardi prefigures the Levinasian notion of substitution.

The capacity to suffer and to guard oneself and others from suffering is already Leopardi's aim in his translation of the above mentioned *Manuale di Epitteto*. "La Ginestra" is, to a degree, an extension of that endeavour in a social context. Rather than on ablating desire, however, the emphasis in "La Ginestra" is on the capacity to feel pain and the focus is shifted from the desire not to suffer onto the desire towards shouldering the other person's suffering. As the poetic voice claims: "E il basso stato e frale / Quella che grande e forte/ Mostra sé nel soffrir, ne' gli odii e l'ire / Fraterne, ancor piu' gravi / D'ogni altro danno, accresce / Alle miserie sue, l'uomo incolpando / Del suo dolor" ("and our poor and feeble state; who shows he's great and strong in suffering / and doesn't add his brother's hate or anger, / worse than any evil, to his ills / by blaming man for his unhappiness"; lines 117-123). Thus the individual is invited to desire community and to specifically address the Other through the "l'onesto e il retto / conversar cittadino / E giustizia e pietade" ("an honest, / just society of citizens / and right and piety will take root"; lines 152-53). The ethical importance of the "conversar cittadino" echoes the Levinasian "Saying" (1.5.5) whereby through this very conversation and social relation with the Other, one's subjectivity is formed.

A special conception of a social alliance,[175] a communally agreed form of resistance is here being proposed also through the communicative value of conversation

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[175] One might argue that this is a pre-social, rather than a social, alliance given its apolitical, almost purely ontological purposes. It is a pact against the fate of suffering decreed by nature, similar to the above-mentioned pact by Plotino and Porfirio. Biral's two essays on "La Ginestra" illustrate this difference. In an essay "Materialismo e progressismo," Biral highlights the blind mechanism of nature's permanence and the human consciousness of a kind of superiority over such permanence. This existential self-awareness is read

in that, as in the "Saying," individuals are conceived as bound together before any social or political ties.[176] According to this special conception, human beings are, in a Levinasian sense, called out of their solitariness to expose themselves to and find their strength in the other person. The coming together of individuals in Leopardi is thus grounded in the recognition that the infinitely omnipotent universe is, and here the distinction from Levinasian thought is striking, the common enemy to all humanity. The dread of this infinitely powerful force is still palpably felt in the peasant who works the ashy earth on the "arida schiena / Del formidabil monte" ("the dry flank / of the terrifying mountain"; lines 1-2) and the nearby excavations at Pompei standing "come sepolto / scheletro" ("like a buried skeleton"; lines 271-72). Human beings have to be compassionate towards one another's suffering because, as in Levinas, the human condition is beyond human control and suffering predates it: "Dell'aspra sorte e del depresso loco / Che natura ci die'" ("the bitter fate / and miserable condition nature handed us"; lines 78-80).

Human beings cannot rid themselves of *amor proprio* or desire, but they can direct the strength resulting from the latter towards mutual compassion. The Leopardian ethics in this poem prefigures the Levinasian one in that it places emphasis on respect for the moral worth of individuals based on their capacity to suffer. In this poem the notion of suffering also prefigures Freud's whereby suffering is caused by the other as a

by Biral as a premise for a political opening (157). A year later Biral wrote "Considerazioni sul messaggio leopardiano" where the word 'political' has completely disappeared. The message of "La Ginestra" is now that human conscience is lacerated and desperately needs to find meaning in order to sustain existence in this world. Norbert Jonard in "Leopardi fra conservazione e progresso" explored this question further. He concludes that Leopardi's vision is not one concerned with class but with a concept of human nature outside any temporal correlates (34). Leopardi's materialism is subversive without, however, denying the humanity that makes the human being unique.

[176] Leopardi's conception of social alliance can be set apart from any theories of social contract *per se* but perhaps this distinction comes out best in a comparison with the first modern notion of social contract in Thomas Hobbes (to be mentioned in 4.1 with reference to Leopardi's *Teoria del Piacere*). In Hobbes, human beings gave power to a sovereign because of their fear of living with each other in a state of nature where chaos reigned supreme. Leopardi's desiring the good of-the-other is, as in Hobbes, rooted in *amor proprio*. The question whether morality is grounded in *amor proprio* or 'benevolence' dominated moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 588). This question was sharply posed by Hobbes, whose egoistic view of human nature and morality was challenged, perhaps most significantly, by David Hume, who thought that human beings acted on the basis of an innate benevolence that provided the rudimentary framework on which morality depended. (*The Cambridge Companion to Hume* 162).

"gratuitous addition" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 77). The relations with other human beings will be for Freud, as they were for Leopardi, a source of pain for the individual and in this sense the other in Leopardi is Other in the same Levinasian bruising strangeness: "Mostra se' nel soffrir, ne' gli odii e l'ire/ Fraterne, ancor piu' gravi d'ogni altro danno" ("doesn't add his brother's hate or anger, / worse than any evil, to his ills"; lines 119-21).[177] This does not mean that in "La Ginestra" Leopardi is attempting to profess universal love as the solution to all human malaise. It means that a deep love for humanity is echoed in the poem, which reverberates with a profound regard for the very difficult kind of desire that human beings need to sustain towards one another. Humanity's only consolation is solidarity towards one another's suffering in the face of human infinitesimal insignificance in the endless surrounding misery. The appeal to humankind in "La Ginestra" is based on a solid foundation of the truth about the human condition and human nature: "L'onesto e il retto/ Conversar cittadino, /E giustizia e pietade, altra radice/ Avranno allor che non superbe fole" ("out of real wisdom, then an honest, / just society of citizens / and right and piety will take root"; lines 151-54).[178]

The word "pietade" here reveals the need for compassion as *pietas* derived from the recognition of the suffering the human being is expected to endure. As in Levinas, the suffering and responsibility of the Other is the suffering and responsibility of the 'I'. The individual is essentially a solitary suffering being, but resistance to the sense of nothingness can be achieved by standing in relation to the other. This situation, as I shall argue, is echoed in Beckett's *Endgame*.

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[177] The full quotation from *Civilization and Its Discontents* is: "we tend to regard the suffering that comes from our relations with other human beings as a kind of gratuitous addition, although it cannot be any less fatefully inevitable than the suffering which comes from elsewhere," 77.

[178] The importance of mutual compassion could also be linked to the Stoic *philia* (friendship) and the importance of "affezioni positive" (positive emotions) to which both Epictetus and Epicurus refer.

3.3 Lacanian and Levinasian Desire for the Other in *Endgame*

In Beckett's play *Endgame* compassion towards one another becomes crucial.[179] I read Clov and Hamm and, to some degree, Nell and Nagg as situated on the cusp between two movements of desire. On the one hand, they are torn by a Lacanian desire that perennially creates longing and inner disjunction. On the other hand, there is an appeal to discover a Levinasian desire that brings out compassion towards the other. The appeal to compassion is necessary in order to brace against the immediate external surroundings which are described as "GRREY! . . . From pole to pole" (*CDW* 107), [180] where everything is "corpsed" (106).[181] I argue that the desire that characterizes these

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[179] It is interesting to note that James Knowlson recounts Beckett's early interest in *Unanimisme,* especially the poetry of Jules Romains and Pierre-Jean Jouve, during his final year at Trinity College Dublin: "An outlook that sees the individual as finding some degree of solace in a collective must have held some attraction for a young man who at the time was feeling increasingly his own sense of isolation" (*Damned to Fame* 76). The importance of compassion to one another, also as a philosophical creed, was thus pivotal to Beckett from an early age.

[180] In *Endgame* nature is as destructive as in "La Ginestra." To counterpoise this destruction, Hamm often yearns for a pastoral alternative to the deserted greyness in which he lives. If he could fall asleep, he would, "go into the woods. My eyes would see . . . the sky, the earth . . . I'd run, run, they wouldn't catch me. (Pause) Nature!" (*CDW* 100). As in Leopardi, while the pastoral solace of Nature is nowhere to be found, the blind destruction of natural change and decay is everywhere in *Endgame*.

[181] While the external world in "La Ginestra" is clearly located in the Neapolitan setting of "sterminator Vesevo," the first thirty years of Beckett scholarship repeatedly claimed that Beckett's "imagination functions almost entirely outside of history: what is, has been, and what has been, will be," Gilman, "Beckett," 83. It is worth noting, however, that the early drafts of *Endgame* show a specificity of time and place, namely Picardy/ Normandy in the wake of the First World War. According to S.E. Gontarski, "The devastation in the Picardy/Normandy area was familiar to Beckett, and the World War I setting was not a very subtle means of deflecting the play's autobiographical level away from his World War II experiences in the region"(*The Intent of Undoing* 33). Gontarski suggests that the title of Beckett's hospital activities for Irish Radio, "Humanity in Ruins," might serve "as a gloss on *Fin de Partie*" (34).
Recent Beckett scholarship, on the other hand, has placed *Endgame* in specific cultural and historical contexts. Julie Campbell talks about these cultural markers in "'There is no more . . .': Cultural Memory in *Endgame*". In "Buried! Who would have buried her? : Famine 'ghost graves' in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*," Julieann Ulin argues that *Endgame* plays out an Irish traumatic memory. The perception of the "corpsed" outside world of the play seen as an Irish cultural memory of trauma is also put forward by Ronán McDonald: "It is true that Beckett's skeletal characters and desolate landscape are haunted by ghosts of Auschwitz. Yet it is also the case that the fragmentary narratives, the splintered memories, and the refusal of a dominant narrative voice betoken the fractured consciousness of a country with a traumatic history of famine, displacement, persecution and lost language." In *Tragedy and Irish Writing: Synge, O'Casey, and Beckett*, 142. For Peter Boxall, however, it is rather through a reading of Beckett's "delicate tracery of reference to the cultural and political landscape of Ireland and Europe" that a sense of his politics can be discerned: tracing the traces by which Beckett "simultaneously refers and resists reference" to historical events. "Samuel Beckett", 162.

personages is a far cry from the attempt to become indifferent to desire manifested in *Proust*.

Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg attempt to recapture a never occurred and never-to-be recovered unity revealed in the characters' evocation of one another through speech. The latter paradoxically accentuates that same Lacanian gap "through which neurosis recreates a harmony with a real" (*Seminar XI* 22), that piece of the past that has been foreclosed and is now displaced onto language. As Clov states: "It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust" (*CDW* 120).

Clov's relation to Hamm and Nell's rapport with Nagg can first be examined within the context of Lacan's theory of interminable desire. The latter's paradoxical nature is revealed in the first lines of the play: Clov's "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" keeps being countered by the sudden "heap, a little heap, the impossible heap" (*CDW* 92). The first phrase can be associated with Clov's and Nell's desire to cancel their identity whereas the second refers to Clov's and Nell's impossibility of escaping their increasingly burdensome entities. This interminable cycle is later repeated in Hamm's "it's time it ended" (98), which keeps being faced by "and yet I hesitate, I hesitate to . . . to end" (*CDW* 93).[182]

This interminable cycle of desire reflects Clov and Hamm's and Nell and Nagg's traumatic existence. Their trauma is constituted, on the one hand, by what they choose to conceive as a mythical past that they seem to be unable to recover and that is also a source of regret, as well as an imprisoning present spent in the doldrums of habit and routine. Their trauma lies in their being (apparently) irrecoverably crushed under the mordant bite of an infinitely cyclical desire manifest in their speech: "All life the same questions, the same answers" (*CDW* 94) marking "the end of the day like any other day" (98). The unending cycle of desire, exemplified by the characters' compulsive dialogue,

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[182] Pol Popovic Karic construes the dual movement of cancellation and assertion of identities through Clov and Hamm respectively: "In Clov's and Hamm's interaction, the former seeks the cancellation of their coexistence, while the latter tries to preserve it. Clov's evasion hinges on the cancellation of their social ties and Hamm's efforts to preserve them." (*Ironic Samuel Beckett* 98).

thus reflects their apparent failure to withdraw from the lifelong pain of "this farce, day after day" (*CDW* 99). Furthermore, when pressed toward its furthest limit to express, their speech encounters its own insufficiency. The omnipotence and impotence of speech over-rule the speaker and the tormenting effects produced by language and its promise define the characters' existence. Clov and Hamm's, as well as, Nell and Nagg's struggle, is also one with language as 'Other.'

The alienating speech of both Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg defines their Lacanian lack-of-being. Clov, for instance, is angry, frustrated and dissatisfied with his attempt at speech. Echoing Caliban's outburst to Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* he inveighs: "I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent" (*CDW* 113).[183] The Shakespearean quotations in this text, as will also be the case in *Happy Days*, once more highlight loss because they float like flotsam and jetsam of a devastated literary tradition.[184] The play is in part characterized by this very failure of language, particularly speech, the impossibility of totally articulating thought and conveying meaning, the negation of anything that can ever "sprout" (98). The failure of language is evident in the fragmentary quality of Clov and Hamm's conversation which only approximately succeeds in giving expression:

> CLOV: [*Sadly*.] No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we.
>
> HAMM: We do what we can.
>
> CLOV: We shouldn't.
>
> [*Pause*]
>
> HAMM: You're a bit of all right, aren't you?
>
> CLOV: A smithereen.

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[183] Jennifer Jeffers makes the interesting observation that Clov's angry outburst at Hamm, asking him to reinvigorate a language which no longer produces meaning, is a futile appeal to a return to patriarchal control (*Beckett's Masculinity* 116-7).

[184] Shakespeare has been a constant presence in critical accounts of Beckett. As early as 1963, J. Russell Browne could write confidently of "Mr. Beckett's Shakespeare." Browne was quickly followed by Ruby Cohn in her seminal 1965 essay "*The Tempest* in an *Endgame*."

[*Pause*.]

HAMM: This is slow work. [*Pause*]

(*CDW* 97)

The characters' speech is a manifestation of desire that expresses their futile longing to recuperate a lost symbiosis with the Other. Hamm and Clov are forced to endlessly desire an impossible "Once!" a never-achieved unity that will remain forever inaccessible and will inevitably keep causing pain. The characters are thus trapped into a desire for an irremediable past—in Hamm's case they are painful childhood desires related to his "accursed progenitor" (*CDW* 96), in Nell and Nagg it is more a desire for the happiness of their youth.[185]   The sense of loss permeates all the dialogue evoking nostalgia for a previous sense of a holistic self—"we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals! " (*CDW* 97). As a result the sense of death is palpable: "I see my light dying" (98). When Nagg says that he had lost his tooth the day before, all Nell can repeatedly sigh out in uncritical nostalgia is an elegiac: "Ah yesterday!" (*CDW* 99). Nell's speech reveals an inexorable desire for a sepia-tinted past which, by contrast, highlights the present "Desert!" (*CDW* 103). Beckett had explicitly pointed out, as early as his monograph *Proust*, that time is not just spent but it spends us: "We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday" (*Proust* 13).

This same futile urge for yesterday, a longing to recover a holistic past, is equivalent to the endless compulsion in the desire for the Other whose unconscious frustration and resulting aggression has been displaced onto the characters' truncated or disabled bodies (Clov cannot sit, Hamm is in a wheelchair, Nell and Nagg are canned in bins). Their disabled and fragmentary bodies recall Lacan's dictum that "Aggressiveness

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[185]Jeffers chooses to describe the impossible return to the past in the entire play in terms of an impossible reconnection of the filial bond between father and son: "*Endgame* is a staging of this painful impossibility of return to the father by the son because it would lead to a renewal" (*Beckett's Masculinity* 110).

presents itself in analysis as an aggressive intention and as an image of corporal dislocation" ("Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis"; *Écrits* 84).[186]

The trauma of these characters, however, is not just one of a futile desire for the Other. It is also constituted by the trauma of accusation (see 1.5.7), the trace of which, I argue below, also lies in the characters' speech, hinting at the trace of a bond from an immemorial past. Clov, Nell (and as discussed in 3.4 this is also the case with Winnie) are all vulnerably exposed to the bruising proximity of the Other, to the passivity of the accusative form which ruptures their subjectivity, putting into question all affirmation for-oneself and forcing them to shoulder responsibility in addressing the Other. I argue below that they are all uniquely elected, a uniqueness not assumed, not subsumed, and which is traumatic. All three are involved in the risky uncovering of themselves and the breaking up of their inwardness by exposure to the Other. Their subjectivity is indeed the responsibility of being-in-question in the form of total exposure to offence. The wounding intervention of the Other and the resulting passivity of the accusative form constitutes their persecution. I make a claim for Clov, Nell (and also Winnie) as ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded. In the trauma of persecution they pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense they pass from the nothingness of suffering to the infinity in being hostages of the Other to the point of expiation, (Clov repeatedly claims that at certain instances he feels taken over by something, "I wonder if I'm in my right mind . . . in my right senses" [128]). [187] This transfer is subjectivity itself which is the saying proper to responsibility.[188]

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[186] Jeffers conceives of this bodily fragmentation and disintegration as specifically indicative of a patriarchal order that has been completely severed: "Each of the males has become emasculated through disease and bodily disintegration, and with the loss of the masculine goes their concern for upholding the standards of masculinity" (*Beckett's Masculinity* 113).

[187] In *Endgame* the persecution lies, as in Levinas, in the obsession of the Other. Obsession, as in Levinas, is not consciousness, nor a species or a modality of consciousness, even though it overwhelms the consciousness that tends to assume it: "It is unassumable like a persecution…The extreme urgency of the assignation precisely breaks up the equality or serenity of consciousness, which espouses its visible or conceivable object" (*OTB* 87).

[188] The self as responsibility for others is a persecuting obsession and goes against intentionality, such that responsibility for others is not primarily love. It is the impossibility of evading the assignation of the other without blame.

The strange asymmetry and complete supremacy of the Levinasian Other, can thus be ascribed to the self-Other relation in Clov and Hamm and, to a lesser degree, Nell and Nagg in relation to the Levinasian terms 'infinity' and 'totality' (see 1.5).[189] The 'infinity' beyond the confining walls (those same walls Hamm strikes with his knuckles while crying out: "All that's hollow!" (*CDW* 104) is, from the very first stage direction, indirectly referred to and it looms large throughout the play. 'Infinity' is consistently implied through such details as Clov's repeated attempt to look out of the window, the telescope scene, the reference to dreams, forests, hills, woods, the sky, the earth. Thematic allusions to the sea, the ocean beyond, convey a desire for motion, for escape from the instant: "the currents will carry us away, far away" (*CDW* 109). The 'Infinity beyond' is also hinted at through the "no more" running gags which gesture toward literal statements of an alternative state of words detached from things and from objective referents. Indeed the play's projected world is dislocated from objective reference and from the realm of traditional mimesis, and it metaphorically sets the receptor's imaginative engagement adrift. The poetry of this drama questions and disturbs but is also magical in its indefiniteness. Beckett himself had said: "I want to bring poetry into drama, a poetry which has been through the void."[190] Thus the "vicinity" (97) of the world of *Endgame* is placed outside the world of nature and beyond its objective temporality so much so that scenes like the sails of the herring fleet appear to the perceptive as having been brought to a standstill, to "ashes" (113).[191] The world of *Endgame*, as Gary Adelman points out, "negates time itself" (*Naming Beckett's Unnamable* 108) and this sentiment is echoed in Hamm's interjection: "moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (*CDW* 133). Above all, a sense of an inexplicable Infinite where linear

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[189] The relationship between Hamm and Clov has also been taken to suggest hammer and nail *(clou* in Beckett's French) (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 82). This would suggest both their mutual dependence and their capacity to inflict pain on one another.

[190] Beckett is quoted by Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 427.

[191] Michael Guest argues that Clov evokes both the Aristotelian and Augustinian notion of time by spatializing the relation between the continuous flow of time and the instantaneous present. Bringing temporal existence and non-existence into simultaneity, Clov brings the present of *Endgame* outside the world of nature and beyond its objective temporality in the Augustinian realm of divine eternity. In "Paul Ricoeur and Watching *Endgame*." Byron, ed. *Samuel Beckett's Endgame,* 85.

temporality has been suspended is conveyed by the final unexpected appearance of a little boy, an episode I deal with below.

I argue that the inexplicable 'Infinity beyond' in *Endgame* can neither be rigorously described nor fully imagined but it is in the background and reference to it is also peppered throughout Clov and Hamm's speech, the latter playing an important part in binding characters to one another. There is perhaps more behind Clov's somewhat mocking statement that "something is taking its course" (98).[192] Clov's reference to the 'infinity' beyond is explicit when he asks Hamm: "Do you believe in the life to come?" (*CDW* 116) and Hamm, somewhat jeeringly, does not seem to totally rule out this thought (*CDW* 119).[193] This, however, does not mean that the sense of the 'Infinite' in *Endgame* is further from everything that appears, or is present in absence or shown by a symbol. Here the infinite signifies in the refusal of the characters, Clov in rapport with Hamm and Nell with Nagg, to allow themselves to be tamed or domesticated by a theme. I argue that their Saying (see 1.5.5) lies in their proximity to the Other that is an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment opening onto the Infinite.

Levinas' 'infinity' (and 'totality') can thus be grafted, at least initially, onto Clov and Hamm's world views. I read Hamm, "bang in the centre" (105), as at first totalitarian in his attempt to reduce Clov, but also Nagg and Nell,[194] to the same. Hamm's presence

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[192] Russell Smith comments about this passage: "It is clear from the play that something *is* happening, but that this something is happening in a way that defies representation in terms of conventional narrative. The important thing is that a course is being taken: the cycle of repetition is not eternal and immutable, but contains within itself an element of constant but infinitesimal change" In "*Endgame's* Remainders." Byron,ed. *Samuel Beckett's Endgame,*109.

[193] Guest attributes the tenuous and ambiguous temporal condition of *Endgame* to the ambiguous character of Beckett's indicators of metatheatricality. Guest states: "The watcher thus experiences an effect of flicker, of vacillation between mutually exclusive apprehensions of linear and instantaneous, objective and subjective time" (*Samuel Beckett's Endgame* 90).

[194] Nell and Nagg are another self-Other pair where Nagg is the one to knock on Nell's lid and impose a confrontation, the latter being forced to respond to "this farce, day after day" (99). Nagg appeals to Nell in all his destitution and material nudity and Nell, in spite of her own misery, is reluctant but still not able to be deaf to that appeal. As the stage directions indicate, they can only "*turn painfully towards each other*" (99). Nell is forced to respond to the demand of Nagg, who, in turn, claims a pivotal role in wanting Nell's *being-for-him*. When Nell tells of how she laughed on Lake Como because she was happy, Nagg indignantly accuses her of falsity: "It was not, it was not, it was *my* story and nothing else" (102 my emphasis). Nagg who disrupts Nell opens a new dimension shattering her solitude and demanding his place, awakening in Nell the desires in her memory. Nagg and Nell's two ashbins, which are "touching each other, covered with an old sheet" (*CDW* 92), are indicative of the misery which both distances and unites them. As Pol Popovic Karic says, "This contact represents the physical proximity and the mysterious

is, from beginning to end, accusative in its demand for silence from Nell and Nagg, and merciless in its giving instructions to "Clear away this muck! Chuck it in the sea!" and "screw down the lids" (103). In the first lines of the play Hamm is a totalizer who is satisfied with the system he has been able to organize around himself. His outwardly directed but ultimately self-centred totalistic thinking, as well as his constant accusations to Clov (but also to his father: "Accursed progenitor!" and "accursed fornicator" [96], and his mother "damned busybody" [103]), give him control over the other characters. It is also clear that Hamm's charity towards Clov as a child has been turned into an opportunity to wield power: "It was the moment I was waiting for . . .Would I consent to take in the child . . . I can see him still, down on his knees, his hands flat on the ground, glaring at me with his mad eyes, in defiance of my wishes" (118).

Hamm's initial attempt to represent the other person is thus a representation whereby the 'I' dominates the other by attempting to capture the Other in a concept that reduces to the same. Notwithstanding Clov's complaint that he is seeing his light die, Hamm still egoistically demands: "take a look at me" (*CDW* 98) and then "come back and tell me what you think of your light" (*CDW* 98). Clov's life is defined by Hamm's irritating but pressing concerns (he lives in his kitchen "ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait[s] for him to whistle me" *CDW* 93). Clov bears the quotidian brunt of caring for Hamm: "getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes" (94). He desperately attempts to snap out of the trappings that life with Hamm has reserved for him but no casting up of his eyes or brandishing of his fists can make him find the courage to leave Hamm.

Indeed, in being accused through constantly being addressed and contested by Hamm, Clov is singled out and held responsible, a responsibility he himself cannot fathom: "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?" (113). The Levinasian notion of ipseity, where the self is an accusative without a nominative form, reflects this situation linguistically. Clov's being in deficit with regard to himself is brought about by

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abyss that separates the members of both couples, Nagg and Nell, as well as Hamm and Clov" (*Ironic Samuel Beckett* 109).

the moral obligation imposed through Hamm's appeal and as a result Clov's being is disinterested in that it is driven from the outside into itself but in exile in itself. As he admits to himself: "you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you" (*CDW* 132). Clov's and Hamm's choice to engage in banter accusing the other of being the one lesser able to love and more prone to inflict pain, reveals a guilt-ridden self that can only impotently rebel against its being open to an indomitable otherness, to what below I refer to as a Levinasian transcendence encountered at the very core of its subjectivity. Clov is thrown back upon himself in being called upon to answer not just for Hamm but in his place. Clov and Hamm's encounter has indeed been a primordial encounter which obliges them to just be for the other person. As the play progresses, Clov's desire for Hamm, and this is also the case with Nell's desire for Nagg, becomes a desire whereby their 'I' is confronted by its own vulnerability. These personae disrupt each other's sense of self becoming increasingly aware of how the irrevocable presence of the other person is accusative and has, in Levinasian terms, "put . . . the I in question" (*Totality and Infinity* 195).

Clov has been wounded by Hamm, but this being afflicted by him still results in the former's final decision not to quit. Indeed the blow in Clov's affection makes an impact, traumatically, in a past more profound than all that he can reassemble by memory. To the repeated questions as to whether he remembers what has happened, Clov exasperatedly interjects:"What for Christ's sake does it matter?" (*CDW* 128). Yet he still provides his support by remaining on site, a decision which does not seem to stem from his own initiative. Clov's act of not leaving pertains less to the present than to the insurmountable diachrony of time. Clov's subjectivity subjected to Hamm is an irrecoverable time.

Clov's words to Hamm do not ultimately put forth his presence but they expose his exposedness to the latter. Clov's final choice not to leave is the equivalent of the Biblical Abraham's "Here I am," referred to at the beginning of this chapter. It is a pure 'Saying' not convertible into something put forth, the Said, in that, as in Levinas, it is

completely for-the-other (see 1.5.5).[195] The relationship with Hamm, incontestably set up in Saying, is a responsibility for him without any limit or measure, an existence with sacrifice imposed on it without conditions.[196] The relationship of Clov to Hamm is the equivalent of catching sight of an extreme passivity in the relationship with the other, the passive synthesis of its temporality.

Hamm's attempt at 'totality' is thus increasingly called into question as the play unfolds, not least by himself, and Clov's painfully endured coexistence with Hamm increasingly reveals itself incapable of shirking responsibility for the other. Clov, but also Nell, are irritated by the forced coexistence endured ("If I could kill him I'd die happy" 105), but none of them is absolved from any responsibility for the Other. Clov subjects himself to Hamm,[197] and through that subjection, he is involved in what, in Levinasian terms, would be called the resistance and the breakage of the ceiling of 'totality' (*TI* 171). His desire for Hamm, notwithstanding his attempt to concede otherwise, increasingly resembles Levinas' concept of 'infinity'. He only gets as far as the threatening "I'll leave you" (96), and the reason why he never leaves is as comically banal but essential as the answer he provides to Hamm's question: "Why don't you kill me?" to which he replies, "I don't know the combination of the larder." (96). The essentiality of this relationship boils down to as crucial an issue as the one of nourishment. As Levinas states: "To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger" (*TI* 75).

Clov's desire for Hamm is difficult and problematic and calls out for considerable suffering. As the play progresses, however, it is Hamm who calls out to Clov in an alarmingly anguished tone that has shed some of its arrogance and pretense. He starts to seek a conduit to Clov's affective side with implorations (which might sound like provocations, but through which he seems to be testing Clov's loyalty towards him) like: "Will you not kiss me?" (*CDW* 125).[198] The importance of social unity, expressed

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[195] In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas says: "The subject of saying does not give signs, it becomes a sign, turns into an allegiance" (49).

[196] In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas states: "Of itself saying is the sense of patience and pain" (50).

[197] To be subjected is to be exposed to the demand of the Other, a demand which invariably registers itself "on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves" (*Otherwise Than Being* 81).

[198] Pol Popovic Karic comments that Hamm "manages to mask his intentions to create social ties with Clov thanks to a veil of disinterested comments and futile tasks" (*Ironic Samuel Beckett* 102).

through "we," and its potential value, "mean something", comes to the fore when he asks "We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?" (108). As Levinas says, "To be *we* is not to 'jostle' one another or get together around a common task" (*TI* 213).[199] Furthermore, Hamm adds a new humane dimension when he ponders, again in significant first person plural, "we ourselves . . . [*with emotion*] . . . we ourselves . . . at certain moments . . . [*Vehemently*]. To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!" (106).[200]

Hamm's attempt to dig up a past where he presents his actions as potentially ethically significant is a way of reinforcing the social bond that could possibly unite him to Clov. This attempt is also manifest when he insists on the narration of his story where he emphasizes what he chooses to present as 'help' he gave to Clov as a child in order for the latter to survive: "In the end he asked me would I consent to take in the child as well– if he were still alive" (*CDW* 118). Clov is reluctant to hear this story about what Hamm chooses to present as his capacity for pity and compassion. Hamm's later accusation of lack of pity directed towards Clov becomes resonant with repressed guilt when viewed in the light of Hamm's shabby treatment of his own parents and Nagg's reverberating appeal to pity on account of his own kindness towards Hamm: "Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me" (119). It is clear that Nagg still feels the burden of having dedicated himself to Hamm as a boy only to be paid back with the present unkindness, which heightens this burden with accusative remorse: " I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice.[*Pause*] Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope" (*CDW* 120).

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[199] Levinas also expresses the concept of a 'We' as follows: " In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the *We*, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality" (*TI* 300).

[200] In relation to the use of "we" in *Endgame*, Popovic points out, "The spectator senses the importance of social unity, 'we', and its potential value on the spiritual level: "mean something." Hamm's behavior confirms the spectator's interpretation as he insists on their union despite Clov's mockery" (*Ironic Samuel Beckett* 90).

But it is not just Nagg but also Clov who unearths accusations regarding Hamm's past unethicality. Foremost among these instances are the Mother Pegg episode and Clov's weeping for a bicycle and crawling at Hamm's feet only to be told "to get out to hell" (96). The most telling instance, however, is Hamm's own despairing rebuke directed towards his own lack of pity: "All those I might have helped. Helped! Saved. Saved! [*Pause*] The place was crawling with them!" (*CDW* 125). These passages speak volumes about the manner in which Clov is being asked to shoulder responsibility not simply for Hamm but also for Hamm's failure to shoulder responsibility in the past. The burden of this weight is clearly almost unbearable to Clov but his physical presence on stage and his propensity to listen to Hamm's story overshadow his negative response. The threatening persona of Hamm, in what increasingly reveals itself to be a thin film of self-defense, obliges Clov to stay.

There is something almost transcendent that precedes these characters' difficult cohabitation and that irresolutely binds Clov to Hamm (and Nell to Nagg).[201] There is

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[201] T.W. Adorno, in possibly the most famous essay on this play, first published in 1961(1969 in English) insists on its historical singularity after the Second World War, and praises it for its transcendent quality or what he calls: "the play's opposition to ontology" (43). Adorno claims that *Endgame* addresses a crisis in meaning and representation precipitated by the horrors of World War II and the failure of Existentialism. For Adorno, Beckett's *Endgame* is the imaginative counterpart to his philosophical critique of Enlightenment reason. This critique is linked with his horror of the Holocaust, which he saw as the logical endpoint of confidence in human perfectibility. In this vein Adorno attacks subject identity attempting to subvert the delusion of totality in which modern subjects live. He insists on the importance of reviving the vanishing sense of the importance of particulars, the elements that resist the simplifying sweep of the totalitarian mind. This argument, in spite of making very different meanderings, reaches a conclusion with clear resonances of Levinasian thought. This particular excerpt is very relevant in echoing the Levinasian ethic, even though it reaches a conclusion about *Endgame* which is very different from my own:
The individualistic position constitutes the opposite pole to the ontological approach of every kind of existentialism, including of *Being and Time*, and as such belongs with it. Beckett's drama abandons that position like an outmoded bunker. If individual experience in its narrowness and contingency has interpreted itself as a figure of Being, it has received the authority to do so only by asserting itself to be the fundamental characteristic of Being. But that is precisely what is false. The immediacy of individuation was deception: the carrier of individual experience is mediated, conditioned. *Endgame* assumes that the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility. But although the prison of individuation is seen to be both prison and illusion– the stage set is the *imago* of this kind of insight–art cannot break the spell of a detached subjectivity; it can only give concrete form to solipsism (47).
In "Towards an Understanding of *Endgame*,"in *Samuel Beckett*, 39-49. Simon Critchley reacts to Adorno's essay on *Endgame* and in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (1997), he states: "The philosopher who has come closest to describing the difficulties of interpreting Beckett and gone furthest in taking up the challenge that he poses to philosophy is, without doubt, Adorno" (147). More recently, Jackie Blackman's reading of *Endgame* situates the play at "a moment in history when silent images and meaningless words became the currency of catastrophe" (73). For Blackman, it was Beckett's exemplary caution about representing the Holocaust that elevated *Endgame* to the status of a classic in

something which, as Beckett had said with reference to this play, 'claws'[202] at the deepest

levels of experience and intuition which are quite ineffable.[203] What I mean by

transcendent here goes beyond the "transcendence of need" that places the subject "in

front of nourishments, in front of the world as nourishment, this transcendence offers the

subject a liberation from itself" (*Time and the Other* 67). In fact this instantaneous

transcendence through space, to which Levinas refers in the early work *Time and the

Other*, does not manage to provide escape from solitude. It is an instantaneous

transcendence achieved through light. Levinas says, "Subjectivity is itself the objectivity

of light. Every object can be spoken of in terms of consciousness–that is, can be brought

to light" (*Time and the Other* 66). Light in Levinas is thus described, along with the

knowledge it brings, "as a way for the subject–emancipated from the anonymity of

existing but riveted to itself through its identity as an existent (that is, materialized)–to

take a distance with regard to its materiality" (*Time and the Other* 65).

　　　The transcendent bonding between Clov and Hamm cannot be achieved in light as

much as it cannot be rationally explained away. Hamm and Clov are confined inside the

walls on the stage and seem to have been bound together before time immemorial,

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Holocaust Studies. Blackman reads *Endgame*'s "oblique traces" of Auschwitz as Beckett's ethical aesthetic response to the Holocaust (73). Blackman also speaks about Beckett-Adorno being positioned together. She says: "Within Holocaust studies and the context of the unsayable, Beckett's play, *Endgame* (1956), and Adorno's well-worn dictum "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1949) are often positioned together, even though there was no chronological connection between the two. A more definite linkage (not commonly alluded to) did come later, however, when Adorno re-visited his judgment of "no poetry" in the light of "Beckett's exemplary autonomous art." Blackman, "Beckett's Theatre After Auschwitz," 71. Blackman is here referring to Adorno's article "Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz." This is a passage from that essay, which Blackman indeed quotes:
The most far-out dictum from Beckett's *Endgame*, that there really is not so much to be feared any more, reacts to a practice whose first sample was given in the concentration camps. . . What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, "Tomorrow you'll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney," bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history. . . Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.("Meditations on Metaphysics" 86 in Blackman, 71)
[202]Beckett wrote of the play's power to 'claw' in a letter to Alan Schneider, dated 21st June 1956. In M. Harmon, ed. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, 11.
[203] We cannot ignore the time-honoured criticism that sees this as the 'endgame' in chess whereby the action seems leached of human will and the characters are chess-pieces being moved by forces outside their control. See McDonald, *Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, 49. The reference to chess has also been construed as articulating a powerful metaphor for infinity. See Michael Worton, "*Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*: theatre as text" in Pilling, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, 71.

outside of light. Indeed, before any character speaks in *Endgame*, the stage directions offer a description of a "bare interior" with "grey light" and on the "left and right back, high up, two windows, curtains drawn" (*CDW* 92). The play is characterized throughout by the absence of much light. This lack of light resonates with meaning when read alongside Levinas' statement: "a being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it . . . the absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation" (*TI* 66).[204] The word transcendent is thus here used attributing to it more than "a transcendence of space" founded on "a transcendence without a return to its point of departure" (*Time and the Other* 66). It is more than an "everyday transcendence" that is stopped from "falling back upon a point that is always the same" (66). Indeed while the latter transcendence is a transcendence to be found in material existence, "wherein light is given in enjoyment" (66), the transcendence that binds these characters operates outside of all light. The characters in *Endgame* are not just torn by desire but they are also revealed through it while having their subjectivity pierced by the other's accusation. Their 'I' substitutes itself for the other and, as in Clov's case, remains and does not forsake the other. Thus being is transcended. The presence of Hamm in front of Clov, Nagg in front of Nell, and even more so Willie in the presence of Winnie (see 3.4) puts in question their world of things experienced (in the case of Winnie also possessed). The encounter with the other is not "encountered as if this thing came from the ego" (*Time and the Other* 68) but an encounter "beyond the knowledge measuring beings–the inordinateness of Desire . . . desire for the absolutely other" (*Totality and Infinity* 34).[205] As Hamm resignedly admits: "You're leaving me all the same" (*CDW* 95) but as Clov answers, that would have been his very wish but he is powerless when confronted by the other's concerns and is unable to quit, in spite of having been perennially trying to do so. His passivity is prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent:

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[204] For Levinas, the elemental world, *apeiron,* what he also terms "the bad infinite or the indefinite" (*TI* 159), can be disclosed but what evokes the infinite, the Other, cannot (*TI* 158-59, 192-93). The infinite can only be revealed. The one who speaks is not disclosed but, in articulating the world, he or she is announced through what he or she presents (*TI* 65-66).[204] And what he or she reveals is the face, the personal. Such revelation, particularly in Hamm's case, reveals itself to Clov through speech.

[205] Levinas explains: "If the notions of totality and being are notions that cover one another, the notion of the transcendent places us beyond categories of being. We thus encounter, in our own way, the Platonic idea of the Good beyond Being" (*TI* 293).

CLOV: Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?

HAMM: You're not able to (113).

Something about Hamm freezes Clov on the spot and, by the end, makes him confront his suffering. The other is foreign to light because the other announces suffering and evokes death itself, outside all light, a confrontation through which the subject discovers its aforementioned passivity in the accusative form. The presence of Hamm announces an event over which Clov knows he is not master just as the presence of Nagg binds Nell to her quotidian sacrifice in shouldering the burden of life in a trash can.

It is thus not in seeing, grasping or other modes of enjoyment, sensibility and possession that transcendence in this play can be achieved. [206] It is, however, in hospitality,[207] in Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg addressing the Other and allowing the Other to be a concrete fact of their intrinsically guilty existence, that the Desire of the Other as absolutely transcendent can be found. The relationship with the Other is thus "the transcendence of expression that founds the contemporaneousness of civilization and the mutuality of every relationship . . . This transcendence of expression itself presupposes the future of alterity" (82). In confronting Hamm, Clov has reached the limit of the possible in suffering and he has been seized by the absolutely unknowable– "absolutely unknowable means foreign to all light" (*Time and the Other* 71)–opening the way to the possibility of transcendence. Levinasian transcendence here thus implies, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, "not just the disappearance of the self, but self-forgetfulness, as a first abnegation" (*Time and the Other* 67). What is claimed by the Levinasian transcendent is the "absolute exteriority of the metaphysical term" (*Totality*

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[206] Levinas explains the difference between vision and discourse as follows: "Vision operates in this manner, totally impossible in discourse. For vision is essentially an adequation of exteriority with interiority: in it exteriority is reabsorbed in the contemplative soul and, as an *adequate idea*, revealed to be a priori . . . The exteriority of discourse cannot be converted into interiority" (*TI* 295). On the contrary, when it comes to the face-to-face proper to discourse, it "does not connect a subject with an object, and differs from the essentially adequate thematization. For no concept lays hold of exteriority" (*TI* 295). He goes on to explain: "Speech refuses vision, because the speaker does not deliver images of himself only, but is personally present in his speech, absolutely exterior to every image he would leave. In language exteriority is exercised, deployed, brought about" (*TI* 296).

[207] On this theme Levinas states: "Hospitality, the one-for-the-other in the ego, delivers it more passively than any passivity from links in a causal chain. Being torn from oneself for another in giving to the other the bread from one's mouth is being able to give up one's soul for another" (79).

and Infinity 35). The other's concern is put first while respecting an otherness that is a reminder of one's guilt and fallibility. This, pushed to the limit, is "sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation" (*Otherwise Than Being* 15). I argue, using a Levinasian line of argumentation, that responsibility for the other in Clov is antecedent to representation and uncovers suffering in the denudation of the face.

The face of the other becomes concretely the intervention of the other and not just in its materiality.[208] The face is that which marks, in Levinasian terms, what I earlier referred to as the failure of Western or traditional philosophy. Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them: "A thing is given, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same. The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed" (*Totality and Infinity* 194). The face in Levinas is that which marks the first limit of the self from outside: "The face has no form added to it, but does not present itself as the formless, as matter that lacks and calls for form" (*TI* 140). The face of Hamm, half covered in black glasses, as well as that of Nagg, cannot be frontally exposed, but both faces call Clov (and Nell) respectively into question. They are faces that are already absent from themselves. Indeed, as alluded above, they are either partially covered or hardly ever directly faced, but they stand for a fall into a past with an unrecoverable lapse, unearthing past suffering and failure. Hamm's (and Nagg's) faces can be construed as the Levinasian "face of the neighbour in its persecuting hatred [which] can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful" (*OTB* 111).

I read the face, particularly Hamm's face, as an evocation of this inexplicable trauma for Clov who is, on the one hand, palpably timorous of facing it, on the other,

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[208] The Levinasian discussion of the face follows the description of the confrontation with the idea of death in *Time and the Other* (see 2.5). The encounter with the face is that which speaks to the inexplicability of the beyond, the 'infinity' beyond the 'totality'. Whereas in *Time and the Other* death for Levinas is an abstract fact of otherness (see 2.5), in *Totality and Infinity* the face emerges as the concrete event that calls attention to the otherness of a being, to death and, subsequently, to responsibility (see 1.5.4; 1.5.6). Levinas insists: "Death is not this master. Always future and unknown it gives rise to fear or flight from responsibilities. Courage exists in spite of it. It has its ideal elsewhere; it commits me to life. Death, source of all myths, is *present* only in the Other, and only in him does it summon me urgently to my final essence, to my responsibility" (*TI* 179).

unable to evade it.[209] Throughout the play, Hamm insists that Clov looks into his scary eyes: "Did you ever see my eyes? . . . Did you never have the curiosity, while I was sleeping, to take off my glasses and look at my eyes? . . . One of these days I'll show them to you.[*Pause*]. It seems they've gone all white" (94). Despite Clov's repeated refusal, he cannot escape the close proximity of Hamm's face, nor does Hamm shy away from imposing a face-to-face confrontation with Clov. Hamm removes what on closer inspection reveals itself to be a "blood-stained handkerchief over his face" (93). He pockets it and whistles to summon Clov, who has been trying to unburden the moral and ethical weight imposed by the paralyzed, and paralyzing, Hamm. As pointed out above, Clov has been desperately trying "to be off" (98) and the overt wish to cancel Hamm's influence is clear when he violently strikes him on the head with the dog.[210] Hamm responds to Clov's blows without swaying enhancing, in this way, Clov's sense of guilt and rubbing salt into the accusative wound: "If you must hit me, hit me with the axe. Or with the gaff, hit me with the gaff. Not with the dog. With the gaff. Or with the axe" (*CDW* 130). The imploration of Hamm halts Clov and, following this hitting, he meekly gives the toy dog back to Hamm. As Levinas would say, "the eyes break through the mask−the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble" (*TI* 66). Clov attempts to avoid, for as long as he can, confronting the language of Hamm's hidden eyes.

But the language of the eyes is also speech conceived as that which consolidates a bonding between human beings which is, as it were, "prior to every question" (177).[211] The linguistic system presupposes an ethical responsibility of the Levinasian 'Saying' prior to the 'Said' (see 1.5.5), a relationship that opens up to the above-mentioned 'infinity' and does not reduce to 'totality.' The presence of exteriority in language, which

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[209]Catanzaro explains this ambiguity as follows: "Hamm exudes gravity, enigma, formal beauty−and exceptionalness, as if time itself had stopped to look at the face of the person sitting. His face assumes an aura of isolated originality and is, we are being told, what it means to be Other." Mary Catanzaro, "Masking and the Body" In Byron, ed. *Samuel Beckett's Endgame,* 177.

[210] As Pol Popovic Karic says: "It is possible that the toy dog represents a deficient support that cannot stand up just as Clov is an unwilling helper" (*Ironic Samuel Beckett* 108).

[211] Levinas says: "Language accomplishes the primordial putting in common . . .The universality a thing receives from the word that extracts it from the *hic et nunc* loses its mystery in the ethical perspective in which language is situated. The *hic et nunc* itself issues from possession, in which the thing is grasped, and language, which designates it to the other, is a primordial dispossession, a first donation. The generality of the word institutes a common world. The ethical event at the basis of generalization is the underlying intention of language" (*TI* 173).

commences with the presence of the face, is produced as goodness. As in Levinas, I read the conversation between Clov and Hamm, but also Nell and Nagg as "language [that] accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same" (*Totality and Infinity* 39). The encounter with the face thus becomes a linguistic experience that can potentially bring out goodness.[212] This encounter becomes morality itself. Prior to everything else, including their speech, Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg seem to have been lumped together in a confined space, outside of which is physical desertion: "humanity might start from there all over again!" (*CDW* 108). These characters are faced with the ethical choice to share the world of the neighbour-as-stranger by answering to the call to address the Other. [213] This obligation to the Other is acted out in what resembles the Levinasian ethic, antecedent to but expressed in language. Such obligation is perhaps the reason why to Clov's question "What is there to keep me here?" (120), Hamm answers "the dialogue" (121).

The relation with the other produced in language, the thinking of the other (and "thought consists in speaking" *Totality and Infinity* 40), the Levinasian 'Saying' over the 'Said,' opens the way to perceive the Other's otherness and the possibility of intuiting infinity rather than the confinement of the Other to sameness and totality.[214] I argue that it is through the 'Saying' that Clov, and to some extent Nell, is awakened to a sensitive awareness, a thinking stripped to the rawest nerve, to an unsupportable suffering. This is

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[212] "Speech proceeds from absolute difference . . . [a]bsolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language" (*Totality and Infinity* 194-95). Levinas claims that, "Speaking, rather than 'letting be,' solicits the other person" (*Totality and Infinity* 195). Speech assumes an interlocutor; the 'I' validates the other person as Other and in that act acknowledges that which exceeds itself.

[213] The for-the-Other arises in Clov, but also in Nell, as a commandment understood in its very obedience, "as if the I obeyed before having heard, as if the intrigue of alterity were woven prior to knowledge" (*Thinking-of-the-Other* 166). Speaking of commandments implies a creed of sorts. In this respect, Paul Cavill and Heather Ward conceive Beckett's *Endgame* as a specific mockery of "the Christian idea that the suffering of Christ is redemptive" (*Christian Tradition in English Literature* 389).

[214] The idea of infinity in Levinas implies a metaphysical infinite. To what extent can a metaphysical infinite be read in the backdrop of a play like *Endgame*? Matthew Feldman poses this question in "'Agnostic Quietism' and Samuel Beckett's Early Development." He states: "Surely by the *Trilogy* and *Endgame*, agnosticism confronts Beckett's creatures in its baldest form: Does God exist and therefore bear responsibility for suffering?" (*Samuel Beckett History, Memory, Archive* 185). In this article, Feldman goes on to argue that quietism in Beckett provides an ethical approach to suffering "as a spiritual purgation to living" (184; see 2.3.1).

what makes Clov persist in answering Hamm, even his most irritating of provocations, and it is also that which compels him to fixate Hamm and not move till the last line of the play.[215]

Indeed in both the Clov-Hamm and Nell-Nagg rapport, "the language precisely maintains the other to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes… their commerce … is ethical" (*Totality and Infinity* 73).[216] Clov's "I" leaves its comfort zone to address and be for Hamm. This relation is the very traversing of this distance, a distance which takes Clov only as far as opening the door of the cell. Clov's realization, hard to live with but necessarily faced is that "the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit" (*CDW* 132). The bleakness of this earthly existence has to be faced in order to aspire to a beyond, in which aspiration lies Clov's subjectivity. Hamm to Clov, as also Nagg to Nell, convey the same earthly bleakness that is necessarily confronted to get a foretaste of the otherness of death. Clov claims that: "the whole place stinks of corpses" (114) while Nell keeps repeating her near-to-drowning experience: "It was deep, deep. And you could see down to the bottom" (*CDW* 102). This face-to-face with the Other is thus also conceived as a relationship with the future of death in the face of which the ego is absolutely without initiative. By the end of the play, Clov has come to recognize himself as a finite being whose contact with Hamm brings to the fore the future of death against which he is totally passive.[217] Clov's passivity is in being accused. Through this passivity Clov can sense the desire for the infinite. The latter has to pass through the

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[215] The dialogue between Clov and Hamm, despite being pared down to a minimum of logicality, is what gives expression to their ethical bond which in itself is antecedent to language. My line of argumentation is thus opposite to the one proposed by Jonathan Boulter's 1998 essay on *Endgame* whereby ". . . the focus in *Endgame* has shifted towards a situating of the possibility of ethics only in the irretrievable narrative past. By positing this I am suggesting that the narrative exchange between the past and the factical now of *Endgame* produces none of the actualities of the ethic . . ." ("Speak no more" 58).

[216] Their dialogue, once conceived in the Levinasian terms of language as "Otherwise than Being" becomes "contact across a distance, relation with the non-touchable, across a void. It takes place in the dimension of absolute desire by which the same is in relation with another that was not simply lost by the same" (*TI* 172).

[217] Levinas says: "Metaphysics, the relation with exteriority, that is, with superiority, indicates, on the contrary, that the relation between the finite and the infinite does not consist in the finite being absorbed in what faces him, but in remaining in his own being, maintaining himself there, acting here below . . . To posit being as exteriority is to apperceive infinity as the Desire for infinity, and thus to understand that the production of infinity calls for separation, the production of the absolute arbitrariness of the I or of the origin" (*TI* 292).

desire for the non-desirable, the ability to face the full implication of one's guilt in "all these dying of their wounds" (*CDW* 132).

A clear parallel can here be drawn between Clov's sense of the infinite and the poetic voice's in Leopardi's "L'Infinito" (see 1.2.1), particularly the sense of the finite self, confronted by the sublimity of the infinite. The Leopardian echoes can also be heard in the way that the other person elicits from within the individual the desire for the infinite ("Alla sua donna"; see 3.2).

Clov senses this infinite beyond and in answer to his own question, "What is there to keep me here?" (120) he promptly replies that, at least ontologically, "There's nowhere else" (95). Clov desperately longs for new horizons that lie yonder. He has had enough "Of this . . . this . . . thing" (*CDW* 94). Nonetheless, as in the intuition of the Levinasian infinite, he can only sense what lies beyond through the obligation that his confined existence imposes on him. His situation mirrors the picture turned towards the wall (he spends most of his time in the kitchen "look[ing] at the wall"[93]) in that, like that same picture, he faces the intransigent reality in the hope of being turned (in Clov's case perhaps whistled) to glimpse what lies on the obverse side. I read the character of Hamm as offering a glimpse of what lies yonder, the metaphysical mystery of the human person, the something that cannot be contained, the bruising impact of the neighbour-as-stranger who calls the other to responsibility. Hamm himself admits his irritating pompousness imposed on others but also the need for the other: "the bigger a man is the fuller he is.[*Pause. Gloomily*] And the emptier" (*CDW* 93). Hamm as a character stands for the something that exceeds grasp and, as such, Clov can only come closer to this infinity by remaining at a distance and by not being indifferent.[218] By not being indifferent, Clov recognizes Hamm as master, who approaches "not from the outside but

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[218] Levinas explains this relation with the other in terms of the desire for exteriority: "If exteriority consists not in being presented as a theme but in being open to desire, the existence of the separated being which desires exteriority no longer consists in caring for Being. To exist has a meaning in another dimension than that of the perduration of the totality; it can go beyond being." This going beyond death is produced not in the universality of thought but in the pluralist relation, in the goodness of being for the Other, in justice: "The surpassing of being starting from being- the relation with exteriority– is not measured by duration. Duration itself becomes visible in the relation with the Other, where being is surpassed" (*TI* 302).

from above" (*TI* 171).[219] The Other is a master who "does not conquer but teaches" (*TI* 171).[220] What the Other teaches is thus his or her very otherness, referred to as height (*TI* 171), or surplus (*TI* 97) (see 1.5.2). [221] Hamm approaches Clov from a clear vantage point of height not just in the manner he accuses Clov but also in the way he threatens him: "I'll give you nothing more to eat . . . I'll give you enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time" (95). Hamm evokes a sense of Levinasian height, implying superiority whereby "the height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching" (*TI* 171).[222] Height and Surplus thus entail facing the otherness of the Other which is also the otherness of a threatening death–death as "ungraspable" (*Time and the Other* 72).[223] Height also entails the sensing of the infinite through the finite, constituted by the painful passage to glimpsing the beyond alluded to by Hamm, whereby death and darkness seem to fill it: "Infinite emptiness will be around you all the resurrected dead of all ages wouldn't fill in . . ." (*CDW* 109). Ross Chambers explains the sensation of an awareness of the infinite in the characters of *Endgame* who seem to be "engaged in a temporal process comparable to the infinite divisions or doublings dear to Zeno."[224]

The sense of the Infinite is palpably felt in the telescope scene where there is both visual and imaginative projection. Clov's otherwise sarcastic "I see . . . a multitude . . . in

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[219] Through the notion of ethical, Levinas brings in the theme of "justice" because this face-to-face approach in conversation is itself "justice."

[220] "Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but it is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality" (*TI* 171). In Levinas this "idea of the infinite . . . is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face" (*Totality and Infinity* 196). The absolutely other of the others and the Infinite is 'traced' as an enigmatic quality in the face. The face of the other person is a "trace in the trace of an abandon, where the equivocation is never abandoned" and is a "trace of itself, trace expelled in a trace" (*Otherwise Than Being* 94). The face is merely a trace of the passing of the Infinite.

[221] Levinas says: "Teaching is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority. In affirming such a production of truth we modify the original meaning of truth . . . taken as the meaning of intentionality" (*TI* 295).

[222] Teaching accentuates in the 'I' the capability of containing more than it can draw from itself.

[223] The facing of the Other is the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face. It discovers the "perpetual postponement of death, in the essential ignorance of its date" (*TI* 165). Levinas says: "The pathos of suffering does not consist solely in the impossibility of fleeing existing, of being backed up against it, but also in the terror of leaving this relationship of light whose transcendence death announces." (*Time and the Other* 78). It is, as Levinas says, "the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject" (*Totality and Infinity* 39). In this relationship with the future the other is, in Levinas' words, "not define[d] . . . by the future, but the future by the other, for the very future of death consists in its total alterity" (82).

[224] Ross Chambers, "An Approach to *Endgame*"in Chevigny, 71-81.

transports . . . of joy" (*CDW* 106) could be a poetic creation in being precisely the elaboration of a setting that is diametrically opposed to the finite one in which he lives. A climax is reached at a particular instant when, on looking through the telescope, a startled Clov exclaims: "Looks like a small boy!" (130). This sudden image of young life, "a potential procreator" (131), dumbfounds Clov and thereby wakes his thought out of self-sameness. [225] His profound speech starting with "They said to me, That's love . . . ," where he clearly expounds the suffering in bearing life with the bruising strangeness of a fellow human being, follows.

The boy who appears out of nothing, seen through that same telescope and who sits outside without harm even though "it's death out there" (*CDW* 126), could thus be interpreted as a paradoxical reminder of the almost abandoned Clov as a child, welcomed in by Hamm: "It was I was a father to you . . . My house a home for you" (*CDW* 110).[226] Now it is Clov the adult's turn to be inspired by Hamm's 'I', the latter becoming a marker of finitude in the face of something more, the inability to contain the other: "The presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing the sphere of the same establishes its 'status' as infinite" (*Totality and Infinity* 195). The emphasis on the positive element of the final 'boy' clearly contradicts several early critical studies which insisted that *Endgame* is a despairing study of despair. In one of these early studies, however, Vivian Mercier adds:

> Many people . . . start hunting for more acceptable interpretations or for 'the
> overtones.' For one thing, the boy at the end of the play might, unknown to
> Hamm and Clov, represent a rebirth of life and hope. One similar thought occurs

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[225] In early Beckett criticism, Martin Esslin had suggested that the boy forebodes to the godless Hamm "redemption from the illusion and evanescence of time through the recognition, and acceptance, of a higher reality," and he saw in the mysterious apparition an allusion to the Christ (because he is a young boy, albeit not new-born) and to the Buddha (because he is contemplating his navel in some versions of the play). Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 70-72.

[226] The father-son relationship is constantly on the backburner in the play. We cannot forget that in the earlier works of Levinas, the relationship with the Other is primarily focused on fecundity in the manner it can produce another Other, who is at once myself but also completely separate. Levinas says: "In fecundity the I transcends the world of light—not to dissolve into the anonymity of the *there is*, but in order to go further than the light, to go *elsewhere*. . . The relation with the son in fecundity does not maintain us in this closed expanse of light and dream, cognitions and powers. It articulates the time of the absolutely other, an alteration of the very substance of him who can—his trans-substantiation" (*TI* 269).

to Hamm: '. . . here we're down in a hole . . . But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green? Eh?'[227]

The reference to a sense of the beyond in the background of the play can thus be found even in unsuspecting early critical receptions which placed most of their emphasis on despair and misery.[228]

The impossibly graspable Infinite, evoked through the intervention of Hamm, moulds Clov as an ethical subject capable of pity and compassion.[229] Towards the end of the play, Hamm calls Clov back three times ending with a grand finale in which the former reminds the latter of his responsibility for him, appealing to his sense of compassion: "One day you'll know what it is, you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on" (110). The appeal to pity, as already mentioned, is rife with repressed guilt, and resurfaces towards the end when Hamm, in almost Levinasian terms and echoing Leopardi's *social catena*, appeals: "Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbour as yourself! . . . like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark" (125-6).[230] This companionship, savage in essence, but like the oft-mentioned painkiller, necessary in order to reduce suffering, is entirely different from the friendship Beckett had talked about earlier on in *Proust*, a friendship situated "somewhere between fatigue and ennui" (*Proust* 63).

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[227] Mercier, "How to read *Endgame*," 12.

[228] The boy episode is more important in the French version *Fin de Partie*. The role of the little boy has been, according to Colin Duckworth, "relega[ed] to near banality in *Endgame* . . . treated by critics as a mere successor to the departing Clov. . . This however could in fact be Beckett's familiar reductive technique applied to the angel of Revelation, come to announce that (as the Jerusalem Bible has it), 'The time of waiting is over.' The polyvalent child . . . has arrived with the good news." In Colin Duckworth, "Re-Evaluating Endgame." Byron,ed. *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, 37.

[229] Clov has been drawn into this face-to-face encounter and is constrained to become responsible for the Other. In the presence of the Other, Clov can make neither an unconstrained act of will nor an impartial decision. It is a matter of compulsion rather than choice, a measureless imbalance of a relation that is more of a non-relation.

[230] Michael Worton interprets Hamm's "Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbour as yourself" as a pungent parody of Jesus'exhortation"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew, 19:19). According to Worton, "Beckett . . . is reminding us of the textual nature of the Bible and thereby suggesting that it does not have to be believed *in toto* or as dogma" (*The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* 84).

Hamm's appeal to Clov to put himself in his shoes could be mapped onto what marks the movement from the central concept of the intervention of the face in *Totality and Infinity* to what becomes central in *Otherwise than Being*: the approach, or "proximity" of the Other that calls the self into "substitution."[231] The "proximity" of the Other cannot be reduced to a moment in time or to a piece of knowledge. A constant backdrop to this play, as alluded to above, is the idea that time cannot be reduced to a linear event but a radical rethinking of the role of a past, particularly a past that echoes the Levinasian notion of an-archic past, is continually pressing on the ethical relations between characters. Events in *Endgame* are "always 'already in the past'" (*Otherwise Than Being* 100),[232] and ethical action is now required to shoulder responsibility for that past.

I read Hamm's final approach as an-archic in its call to responsibility and in its calling out forth for "substitution." Clov is a subject for Hamm in finding himself accused by Hamm. Clov's response is not an act of self-positing, it is rather the passivity of an exposure. His final decision to remain is a subjection of himself to the Good. By the end of the play Clov has revealed the singularity of his subjectivity faced by the inapprehendability of Hamm's otherness and the unsatisfiability of the moral exigency he presents. In responding to Hamm, Clov takes upon himself Hamm's past and present suffering and in the end does not leave. Substitution becomes, as I point out at the beginning of this chapter and with reference to Leopardian compassion, not simply taking on responsibility for but the taking on of the responsibility of the other person.[233]

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[231] Clearly in this later work Levinas is at his most sophisticated where the approach and substitution are the events of the Other described in non-phenomenological terms. In the earlier work Levinas stressed the difficulty of describing the event of the face, marking it as the failure of philosophy. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas actually attempts to make the move beyond phenomenology itself.

[232] "An-archy" is that which "brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again" (*Otherwise Than Being* 101). An-archy is the event that interrupts the ego in its solitude, "interrupting it, leaving it speechless. Anarchy is persecution" (*Otherwise Than Being* 101).

[233] As Levinas puts it: "The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of the other person. In responsibility for the other person subjectivity is only this unlimited passivity of an accusative which does not issue out of a declension it would have undergone starting from the normative . . . Everything is from the start in the accusative" (*Otherwise Than Being* 112).

When Clov turns towards Hamm and fixedly looks at him, first in response to Hamm's "It was I was a father to you" (*CDW* 110), and then at the very end of the play, an action that repeats the one with which the play opens, it is clear that the same inexplicable bond that kept Clov serving Hamm at the beginning cannot be erased. The appeal to responsibility flows forth from Hamm's suffering: "*Clov, dressed for the road. Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag. He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, **till the end***" (*CDW* 133, my emphasis). In the end Clov's responsibility to Hamm is based on a desire that is positively attracted by something other not yet possessed or needed. [234] He is faced by the crucial issue as to what is orienting his ethical action in such dire and bleak circumstances where Hamm's "Discard" constitutes the essence of relations. His is an intuition of the Infinite or, as in Levinas, the "idea of the Good in me" (*Of God who comes to mind* 23), which leaves its mark in the subject's depths and is what inspires the human being to be humane and compassionate. The idea of the Infinite is precisely the signification of something non-finite within the finite or, as Leopardi argues, "L'uomo . . . non è propriamente mai toccato ne' da invidia ne' da desiderio dell'immensa e piena felicità di Dio, se non solo in quanto immensa, e più in quanto piena e perfetta" ("the human being . . . is never really touched by envy or desire of the immensity and the fullness of God's happiness, if not only in terms of its immensity, its fullness and its perfection"; *Zibaldone* 3497,1; my translation). As Levinas writes: "the in of the Infinite signified at once the non- and the within" (*Of God who comes to mind* 63). Clov's choice to stay is the recognition of a desire for the Infinite, a desire for the other that leaves itself as a trace in the same.[235] This metaphysical element that looms large in the play is like the "in" of the Infinite, which:

> Hollows out a desire that could not be filled, one nourished from its own increase, exalted as Desire–one that withdraws from its satisfaction as it draws near to the

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[234] This desire comes close to the Levinasian desire described as that through which signification could be measured: "Signification, irreducible to intuitions, is measured by Desire, morality, and goodness–the infinite exigency with regard to oneself, or Desire of the other, or relation with infinity" (*TI* 297).:

[235] Dirk Van Hulle points out that in early manuscripts which genetic research has variously attributed to *Endgame,* "A and B respectively persuade themselves that they are not alone…the characters wonder whether the 'third' might be Christ." "Writing Relics." *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Achive*. Ed.Sean Kennedy and Katherine Weiss. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 173-74.

> Desirable. This is a Desire for what is beyond satisfaction, and which does not identify, as need does, a term or an end. A desire without end, from beyond Being: dis-interestedness, transcendence–desire for the Good. (*Of God that comes to mind* 67)

The desire for the good beyond being is finally expressed in the fact that it is not simply Clov that is obliged to Hamm, or Hamm to Clov but "It's we are obliged to each other" (*CDW* 132). In the ethically-marked subject, a notion of the infinite, "the wholly Other, the most strange of all who at the same time is the most near, can be traced" (*Of God who comes to mind* 68). Clov, in his vulnerability, has been awakened into an alert response, or as Hamm claims in his last speech: "I put him before his responsibilities!" (*CDW* 133). The desire for that which exceeds him, the "good beyond being" is awakened. The good beyond being in Clov, his desire to be more than he is and to think more than he can think, is in part incarnated in the little boy standing on his own at the door and re-awakening the image of little Clov at Hamm's door. This image brings out in Clov a good beyond being which is also beyond thought and is that which won't allow him to do what is rationally obvious–leave. Indeed in a play where the ubiquitous bareness, greyness, gloominess and confinement are sounded out very early on, it is through the confrontation with such bleakness that the desire of the Other is brought to the fore, a desire which has revealed its compassionate side that can offer that something which is not utter nothingness. As Levinas says: "It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity–even the little there is" (*OTB* 118).

For the characters in *Endgame* then, as for Levinas, desiring the Other is not a sign of heroic mastery but an indication of vulnerability which is not harmful since, to use Levinas' term, the Other is a marvel (*TI* 292). It is also in this desire that the possibility of showing human love, that horror of horrors that oozes contempt out of many, is awakened.[236] This is a love that does not degenerate into *Eros* and is defined by Levinas as follows:

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[236] One critic to have specifically argued for love in Beckett is Alain Badiou in his *Beckett: L'increvable désir* (1995), a short volume which effectively summarizes ideas about Beckett's output which made

> For the Desire beyond being . . . might not be an absorption into immanence . . .
> the Desirable . . . must remain separated in the Desire; as desirable-near yet
> different . . . This can only be if the Desirable commands me to what is the non-
> desirable, to the undesirable par excellence; to another. We have shown elsewhere
> the substitution for another at the heart of this responsibility . . . thus also the
> transcendence of goodness, the nobility of pure enduring, an ipseity of pure
> election. Love without Eros (*Of God who comes to Mind* 68).[237]

The teaching of the critique of heroic or Western self-sufficiency is then built on a type of vulnerability, a type of openness that, alongside any intent of undoing, struggles to bear witness revealing ethical engagement. It is a desire of the Infinite that turns us away from the Infinite as object of desire towards that which is undesirable–the other person. The openness to the Other exposes a quality insistently present in the lines of *Endgame*. That quality is painful human love. Its corollaries are compassion and affirmation. In Jonathan Boulter's words, this play demonstrates its theme(s): "ruthlessly—though with no small amount of compassion" (*Beckett: A Guide For the Perplexed* 104). In answer to Clov's query "Why [do] I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?" Hamm's own words

themselves heard more forcefully towards the turn of the century. Badiou adds to the trajectory of criticism on Beckett begun by Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot in the early 1950s and picked up by Deleuze in the 1990s. Badiou vociferously argues against what was then the still prevalent view that Beckett's later drama and fiction betokens increasing negativity and nihilism. He insists, on the contrary, that Beckett's plays tend, almost aggressively, towards affirmation *(L'Increvable désir* 13). Interestingly, Badiou argues that the most important technique in projecting the human figure in its infinite poverty is that of seeking, as a necessary preliminary, to reduce humanity to its indestructible functions (19). Badiou concentrates on Beckett's rethinking of human subjectivity and moves, as does this dissertation, from a discussion of Beckett's early 'methodical asceticism' to a reading of a very important shift he sees in Beckett's work, from the solitary human subject to questions of the Other, thus relationships with others. Badiou explicitly states that whereas the early prose works journey towards inner solitude, the shift to theatre marks an increasing movement towards the couple, the voice of the other, and love (47). While I obviously agree with this line of argumentation, which, as a matter of fact, I follow in this dissertation, I do think that Badiou fails to emphasize the difficulty and painfulness of the human love Beckett is projecting in the plays. It is also ironic that Badiou would have never considered Levinas' notion of the desire of the Other as applicable to the desire of the Other in Beckett's plays, given that he was overtly, I would say, unfairly, ultra-critical of Levinas' philosophy.

[237] It is pertinent to note that in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas refrains from calling this desire love: "The for-the-other characteristic of the subject can be interpreted neither as a guilt complex . . . nor as some love or tendency to sacrifice" (124). At the very end of *Otherwise Than Being*, however, Levinas uses specifically this word: "The caress of love, always the same, in the last accounting . . . is always different and overflows with exorbitance the songs, poems and admissions in which it is said in so many different ways and through so many themes" *(OTB* 184).

are particularly evocative in conveying this very message: "perhaps it's compassion [*Pause*.] A kind of great compassion. [*Pause*.] Oh you won't find it easy, you won't find it easy" (*CDW* 129).[238]

3.4   Lacanian and Levinasian Desire for the Other in *Happy Days*

In *Happy Days* Winnie is as much the Lacanian split subject as she is a being, in Levinasian terms, "for-the-Other". At the opening of the play, the Leopardian *noia* as frustrated desire, discussed in 2.1, appears to fill the interstices of this play and indeed Winnie attempts to exploit as much as she struggles against it.[239] Winnie's desire for the O/other can therefore be identified with a struggle in which there is, on the one hand, the Lacanian human desire that is forever haunted by the dream of recovering an original source of utter plenitude and un-differentiation. It is thus a Lacanian desire that is illusory and was never possessed, the same "wilderness" she wishes she could but knows she cannot ever bear, the "all comes back" that she quickly corrects to "All? […] No, not all. [*smile*] No no. [*smile off*]. Not quite" (144). On the other hand, it is a desire that, while seeming to hang on the flimsiest of strings, calls for responsibility for the other and ultimately assumes its Levinasian obligation to the Other. Winnie's desire is thus a web of both unconscious forces as well as a desire that founds her subjectivity as signification of her being-for-the-Other. As in the Lacanian "I" and the Levinasian subject, each foundationally inscribed by the intervention of the other while remaining two radically differing versions of the self, Winnie struggles between two poles of the 'self'. As she states: "some day the earth will yield and let me go, the pull is so great" (*CDW* 151-2). Whether in the Lacanian Other, or the Levinasian being-for-the-Other, the linguistic aspect for Winnie is inescapable. As she asks herself upfront "What would I do without them, when words fail?" (162)

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[238] The play ends with Hamm putting a stauncher of blood (the hankerchief) over his face. The stanch can, however, also refer to a staunch friend whose companionship is capable of stopping further haemorraege of pain. It could be that Hamm's last words "You remain" might be a command to his partner to stay.
[239] The situation of Winnie and Willie seems to echo the one of Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg in that they seem to be the last inhabitants following a world catastrophe. The Shower or Cooker couple seem to be "last human kind- to stray this way" (157). Stanley Gontarski in *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts,* points out that in the early manuscripts of this play, Willie reads a newspaper whose headline is about rockets attacking the earth (80).

Winnie's unconscious forces indeed find their milieu in "the unconscious desire of the Other" (*Écrits* 267), which is the Lacanian Other as the locus of the linguistic signifier. As Drucilla Cornell puts it, evoking Winnie who goes on talking as she sinks: "The voice of Woman evokes hope of a beyond, an Other in her very effort to talk" (205). While I would not go as far as speaking about 'hope' in *Happy Days*, I argue that Winnie's words are indicative of her attempt to pursue and express her frustrated desire of the Other, an Other that gives her little solace and causes her much irritation but who is simultaneously perceived as necessary:

> If only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear.[*Pause*]. Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God Forbid. [*Pause*.] Days perhaps when you hear nothing. [*Pause*] But days too when you answer. [*Pause*] So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do–for any length of time. [*Pause*] That is what enables me to go on, go on talking that is. (145)

Winnie clings to what she insists on construing as the positivity of the other's presence: "Someone is looking at me still . . . Caring for me still" (160). Her perceived aliveness is insistently sensed in her desperate conviction that, for all the bleakness and waste, there is the inextinguishable sense that "There always remains something . . . Of everything . . . Some remains" (161). Her desire of the Other, as also her desire to communicate, is indeed infinitely cyclical. Winnie implores Willie: "Don't go off on me again now dear will you please, I may need you" (*CDW* 141). She tells him this as she brings out the revolver from her "capacious black bag", holds it up and kisses it, even though, significantly, she never avails herself of its service. [240] Constant references to things that are "running out . . . cannot be helped . . . old things . . . no zest . . . no interest . . . sleep forever" (139), "loss of spirits . . . lack of keenness . . . want of appetite . . .", "fleeting joys" (141), are juxtaposed to the ubiquitous expressions of "Oh this is going to be

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[240] It is thus not only the otherness of death that is intuited in the absent presence of Willie and not just her own death that she wishes for but, as alluded to below, she also paradoxically recognizes, and through her desire attempts to override, her murderous instincts towards Willie.

another happy day" (142) and "that is what I find so wonderful" (143). The same see-sawing is present in the stage directions which frequently indicate "*happy expression off*" preceded by "*happy expression.*"

Winnie's speech thus masks a two-pronged desire: a Lacanian versus a Levinasian desire, the latter to be discussed below. The first instance is the desire, or anti-desire (see 1.4.2), to return to the state where neither desire nor language are any longer possible but where, as evoked in Beckett's *Proust*, a zone of heightened sensitivity brings out the suffering of being:

> And if for some strange reason no further pains are possible, why then just close the eyes–[*she does so*]– and wait for the day to come–[*opens eyes*]–the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hundred hours. (*CDW* 144)

The disintegration of the self seems to be what Winnie's subject at its very imaginary heart is—pure fiction that can melt away and disappear into thin air. The urge to reach the suspension of desire, the very struggle at the heart of the Imaginary, could be expressed by Winnie's dream of "that feeling . . . of being sucked up" (*CDW* 152), echoing the Lacanian encounter with the other that clearly marks an "antihumanist" reading of the creation of the 'I'. Winnie desperately attempts to keep her life pieced together creating herself in relation to the other. Her words re-create her as striving to be the whole she is not, while those same fragmentary utterances reveal the violence of a displaced frustrated desire. Winnie's articulations reveal disjointedness and brokenness that refer back to her essentially broken self. There is, underneath the defensively chirpy prattle, a deeper tormented 'self' in troubling discord with itself. The play is shot through with indications that point to Winnie as a Lacanian breached subject.[241] Lacan's thoughts on the speaking subject are pertinent to Winnie's case:

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[241] Beckett would refer to Winnie as an 'interrupted being.'During the rehearsals of the Royal Court production of *Happy Days* in 1979 that he himself directed, he commented, "One of the clues of the play is interruption. Something begins; something else begins. She begins but doesn't carry through with it. She's constantly being interrupted or interrupting herself. She's an interrupted being." In Martha Fehsenfeld's *Rehearsal Diary,* in James Knowlson, ed. *Happy Days: The Production Notebook of Samuel Beckett*, 177.

It is the world of words that creates the world of things- things which at first run together in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of becoming – by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been … Man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man (*Écrits* 229).[242]

Winnie assiduously struggles in attempting to utter life through the flow of her non-stop utterances, a manifestation of the infinite desire of the Other. Her speech, however, is necessary and is instigated and driven by that which she does not contain or comprehend but which exceeds her, as is the futurity and mystery of death, the latter intuited through Willie. The distance separating Winnie and Willie is indeed filled with words and things commented upon, or read out, using more words. As she tells him "if you were to die– [*smile*]–to speak in the old style– [*smile off*]–or go away and leave me, then what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep? [*pause*] Simply gaze before me *with compressed lips*" (145, emphasis mine).

It is Willie who gives birth in Winnie to language used for communication thereby becoming her Other since the origin of her speech lies in an articulate response to his unsettling presence. As Levinas says, the one who speaks is, in articulating the world, announced across what he or she presents (*TI* 65-66). In Winnie's case, language is the very passage from the individual to the general. Winnie's running commentary attempts, against all odds, to create a common world with the Other: questioning Willie about the use of correct grammatical structures "them or it?" (146), asking him whether even words sometimes fail and insisting that he repeats her quotation to which he reluctantly in part succumbs by uttering "fear no more" (148).[243] Throughout the play she strives to achieve a face-to-face gaze and she is interested in the language of the eyes, already mentioned in the analysis of *Endgame*: "Could you see me, Willie, do you think, from where you are, if you were to raise your eyes in my direction?. . . Lift up your eyes to me,

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[242] The implication of this assertion is what Lacan goes on to state, namely that language not only prefigures but forms sexual difference: "The signified is not what you hear. What you hear is the signifier. The signified is the effect of the signifier" (*Seminar XX* 33). In practice: the phallus comes first, the object of desire that it represents, second; the sexuated identity comes first, the biological body onto which it is described, second; the subject comes first, the self, second. All this implies the retroactive positing of the Real as prior.

[243] As Levinas would say, "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces" (*TI* 76).

Willie, and tell me can you see me, do that for me" (149). This language is clearly headed one way and Winnie discovers her implacability in accepting the persecuting silence that ensues: "Oh I can well imagine what is passing through your mind, it is not enough to have to listen to the woman, now I must look at her as well" (148). Indeed her predicament, her 'woe', lies in having ". . . to see what I see" (*CDW* 140) and in her Saying over the Said, a discourse that opens up to the difficult Levinasian desire of the Other: "what a joy in any case to know you are there, as usual, and perhaps awake, and perhaps taking all this in, some of all this, what a happy day for me . . . it will have been" (*CDW* 152).

Behind the irony of these words there is a repressed tenderness. To wait and suffer for the Other is to evince a trait of bravery, even of nobility, the same magnanimity Leopardi spoke about. Winnie combats the encroaching external negativity by desperately seeking the presence of Willie's miserable self. This gesture could once more be construed as a conceptual approximate to the *social catena* in "La Ginestra," and thus as coming close to offering solidarity against the hostile infinite universe that Leopardi expounds.[244] At various points Winnie stops to check whether her words are being listened to: "I hope you are taking in . . ." (144) but she knows she can only limit herself to being-for-Willie without expecting anything in return: "just to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don't is all I need, just to feel you there within earshot and conceivably on the *qui vive* is all I ask" (148). A few lines down she explicitly gives voice to this bearing par excellence in her being-for-the other: "Oh I

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[244] Annamaria Cascetta reports how Giorgio Strehler's staging of *Happy Days* in the early eighties was "nourished by Leopardi and Camus, [who] imbued the performance with a heroic humanism and a pronounced ethical commitment by foregrounding the stoic resistance of the individual to evil, pain, and death. Both the décor and style of acting served to reinforce this interpretation. On stage, an undulating dune-like space covered by thin white dust simulated the desert. The yellow or light blue light peculiar to Strehler's atmospheres dimmed the whiteness. Projected onto the background, a starry sky expanded into other galaxies with many Winnies reflecting the Winnie on stage. The allusion to Leopardi's poetry is clear, especially "Alla Luna" and "Canto notturno di un pastore errante nell'Asia." In referring to Leopardi's poem "La Ginestra," Strehler hints at the flower's resistance, its tenacity and continuous re-birth. For Leopardi, however, closer in spirit to Beckett, the 'broom' is flexible, humble, docile in the face of destiny (154).

know it does not follow when two are gathered together . . . that because one sees the other the other sees the one, life has taught me that" (149).[245]

Willie holds Winnie hostage, and indeed her physical entrapment in a mound, while Willie nonchalantly positions himself around her, could be construed as a metaphor of her 'an-archical' and inescapable obligation to the other. As Jonathan Boulter says: "At one level thus Winnie's physical predicament is a way of concretizing *the notion of entrapment which occurs as roles, perhaps not of our choosing, are thrust upon us*" (*A Guide for the Perplexed* 61, emphasis mine). The play opens with Winnie already stuck in a mound and no explanation is given as to what lead to this state of affairs. As in all of Beckett, however, realism is a deceptive sea where the strangest of fish can swim. Winnie herself does not pose the question despite knowing that her situation stands out. She reports others' puzzlement at her sorry sight and, very significantly, she perceives herself as subjected to Willie: "Why doesn't he dig her out? . . . What good is she to him like that?" (*CDW* 157).

The opening to the desire of the Other, the intuition of the Infinite through the difficult and miserly existence offered by the finite, can offer, as Levinas points out, a way out of an aporetic existential condition. Willie's presence serves Winnie as one of the poles of her address and a source of sorrow in which she insists on seeing joy. Winnie can thus also be construed as the ethical subject "for-the- Other" who assumes the responsibility that comes with finding herself, in Levinasian terms, elected. In metaphysical desire, the Other, who cannot be integrated, disrupts the sense of self. In being open to a transcendence encountered at the very core of subjectivity, with which no bartering, exchange or reciprocity is conceivable, Winnie's guilt-ridden self is witnessed, as the play unfolds, in its struggle to exist.

Indeed at the beginning of the play Winnie looks more like an emerging Levinasian existent, where the Ego attempts to master and leave behind the anonymous "there is" described in *Time and the Other* and other later works (see 2.5). Winnie strives

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[245] As Levinas would say in *Otherwise Than Being* "the-one-for-the-other itself–is the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives" (78).

to overcome the tragedy of solitude and material life almost echoing Levinas' dictum that, "materiality and solitude go together. Solitude is . . . the companion, so to speak, of an everyday existence haunted by matter" (58).

Winnie initially seems to be an existent in solitude who has recognized material life in its triumph over the anonymity of existing, and the tragic finality to which she is bound in this very freedom. She is left alone and unformed caught up from the waist down in a mound. All the material things, which she starts to deliberately display around her, become an extension of her own persona. She is at this early stage, as Levinas would describe, an existent "occupied with itself . . . Identity [being] . . . an enchainment to itself" (*Time and the Other* 55). Winnie initially resembles the Levinasian ego turning back on itself as described in *Time and the Other*, where the relationship is with: "a double chained to the ego, a viscous, heavy, stupid double, but one the ego [*le moi*] is with precisely because it is me [*moi*]. This is manifest in the fact that it is necessary to be occupied with oneself" (*Time and the Other* 56). The finality of Winnie as an existent, which initially constitutes the tragedy of her solitude, is thus her materiality whereby she is reduced to being literally mired in her own trapping mound surrounded by things. Her solitude is tragic because she is shut up within the captivity of her mound and totally absorbed in the contents of her "capacious black bag" (*CDW* 138). In order for Winnie to shatter the enchainment of matter, she has to shatter the finality of hypostasis (see 2.5).

In *Time and the Other* Levinas states that, "Though in the pure and simple identity of hypostasis, the subject is bogged down in itself, in the world, instead of a return to itself, there is a 'relationship with everything that is necessary for being'. The subject separates from itself. Light is the prerequisite for such a possibility" (*Time and the Other* 63). All these trivial objects, totally and completely revealed under the "blaze of hellish light" (*CDW* 140) increasingly make Winnie confront the objects she is accumulating around her. This confrontation is telling in view of Levinas' teaching on light (see 3.3). Concern for things and needs absorbs Winnie in solitude; the encounter with objects under the blazing light is intelligibility itself and makes Winnie's encountered things as if they were in a direct relation to her ego. Winnie becomes an existent in this subjective act. In *Proust* Beckett had expressed a similar sentiment when

he defines "attainment" as "the identification of the subject with the object of his desire" (*Proust* 14).

In *Time and the Other* the itinerary–from anonymous "there is" to the emergence of subjectivity and its practice–is concluded in the subject's shattering relationship with the alterity of the other person, dealt specifically in terms of eros, voluptuosity and fecundity. In a similar movement this is also the case in my reading of the unfolding of Winnie's existence in relation to Willie, who is "the absolutely other–[who] paralyzes possession" (*TI* 171).[246] Intimate self-enclosure of the Levinasian subject is evaded by being-in-the-world: "our existence in the world constitute[s] a fundamental advance of the subject in overcoming the weight that it is to itself, in overcoming its materiality–that is to say, in loosening the bond between the self and the ego" (*Time and the Other* 62). Winnie also needs to shatter her bond to materiality and, subsequently, her solitude.[247]

I read in Winnie a progression toward a desire to break out of the circuits of sameness, a desire that she attempts through the Levinasian 'caress,' despite being confronted by the failure of eros, voluptuosity and fecundity.[248] In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says:

> The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it" (*TI* 258).

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[246] In *Time and the Other* Levinas has already caught sight of the subject's desire to escape itself, where the subject's ecstatic projection into the world is characterized as "salvation" (*Time and the Other* 61).

[247] In so doing she needs to overcome the absence of time by being in time. Time is here conceived in Levinasian terms as the future that, as I argue, is evoked by the presence of the Other. In *Time and the Other* Levinas follows a rather strict usage of phenomenological reduction: the analysis of the phenomenon of the advent of the other as breaking up the synchrony of time.

[248] Levinas says: " There is in the erotic relationship a characteristic reversal of the subjectivity issued from position, a reversion of the virile and heroic I which in positing itself put an end to the anonymity of the *there is,* and determined a mode of existence that opens forth the light" (*TI* 270). Levinas, however, also points out that in the erotic relationship "The I springs forth without returning, finds itself the self of an other: its pleasure, its pain is pleasure over the pleasure of the other or over his pain–though not through sympathy or compassion" (*TI* 271).

The erotic relationship, central to *Time and the Other*, and which I read in the backdrop of *Happy Days*, is in this play accentuated through its failure. I argue below that Winnie is here conceived of as both the "feminine Other"[249] who attempts to escape presence, as well as being the one attempting the 'caress' to the withdrawing Willie, putting into practice the Levinasian dictum that "Eros . . . arrests the return of the I to itself" (*TI* 271).[250] To recognize the Other is also to come to him across the world of possessed things.[251]

Winnie's desire of Willie conceived from this angle is particularly challenging because it fails to accomplish those same two aspects Levinas mentions in his early work as the crowning achievements of desire. According to Levinas, desire is above all accomplished in the face-to-face relation, which is, as argued in the analysis of *Endgame*, clearly not just the materiality of skin and facial features, much as the latter are not precluded. The second aspect which neatly ties in with the erotic aspect is fecundity, first discussed by Levinas in *Time and the Other* but further amplified in *Totality and Infinity*.[252] These two Levinasian aspects associated with desire are underscored in *Happy Days* through their absence which looms large. The play constantly alludes to the childlessness and senility of this old couple who are struggling with the difficulty of "crawling backwards" (*CDW* 147). In the end, Winnie is faced by the inability of being in relation with another Other, because of her childlessness and senility.

Winnie appears as an object of need but by the end she still proves capable of a desire not based on need. The presence of Willie tears her away from solitude and throws

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[249] The feminine Other is described in Levinas as follows: "the sbsolutely contrary contrary, whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine" (85).

[250] As the feminine Other, Levinas projects this figure as withdrawing in a mystery: "In voluptuosity the Other, the feminine, withdraws into its mystery. The relation with it is a relation with its absence, an absence on the plane of knowledge–the unknown–but a presence in voluptuosity" (*TI* 277).

[251] Winnie's desire of Willie tangentially alludes to sentimental or erotic love which is, at least in part, hinted at by Willie's obscene picture. Love as Eros is here partially relevant because, as in Lacan, it is here also construed as bound up with aggression, knowledge and a struggle for an impossible unity. As Lacan asks, "What is involved in love? . . . is love about making one? Is Eros a tension toward the One?" (*Seminar XX* 5). Lacan would insist that love confirms the self's struggle for unity, for a desire to return to a phantasmatic unity based on a prior union, a phantasy to return to the womb, which is one aspect of Winnie's desire.

[252] Through the category of fecundity, the feminine as alterity in Levinas can also offer a way of transcendence.

her into contact with the Other. As Annamaria Cascetta proposes, contrary to the Sartrean look of alienation, "for Beckett's Winnie, the 'look' is relationship, reciprocity, and the sense of existence" (153). It is not until the intervention of the other−on whom she grafts the obscurity of her own Other−and thus Willie's briefest of brief answers to her imploring questions, that Winnie as feminine accomplishes alterity. Indeed Winnie is not accomplished as a being in transcendence toward light, but in modesty. Her transcendence consists in withdrawing in the mound (up to the neck by the second act), a movement opposed to the movement of consciousness. The relationship of Winnie to Willie is also a relationship with alterity, with mystery, with the future, "with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there–not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity" (88). Winnie thus attempts 'the caress' towards Willie but not in terms of contact as sensation but in terms of the seeking of the caress which, Levinas explains, "constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks" (*Time and the Other* 89). [253] Indeed Winnie never entirely gives up the possibility of the Levinasian "caress" (see 1.5), even when she is sucked down to her neck. In the failure of the movement of Eros, as in the failure of voluptuosity and the erotic encounter, something Willie seems to be concerned with because of his keen interest in obscene posters, there is still the possibility of "compassion for the passivity, for the suffering, for the evanescence of the tender" (*Totality and Infinity* 259). Compassion is here indicated, as was the case for Leopardi and Schopenhauer, as a greatly superior form of love and desire. Indeed the failure of Eros opens up the possibility of the universalization of the an-archical ethical.

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[253] The presentation of the feminine in Levinas is rather problematic. Whereas he attempts to distance his treatment of the feminine from patriarchal forces ("I do not want to ignore the legitimate claims of the feminism that presupposes all the acquired attainments of civilisation" [*Time and the Other* 86]), Levinas engages in a characterization of the feminine that cannot but be construed as masculinist. The subject for Levinas is always masculine. In *Otherwise Than Being* Eros is significantly given up in favour of substitution and the feminine is no longer posited as alterity personified. By abstracting the confrontation with the other person, and in so doing thereby moving toward a confrontation with otherness in the person as the trace of God, Levinas offers a different way of thinking alterity and transcendence that is not masculinist in approach. Much as I make considerable use of the earlier works in the analysis of *Happy Days,* I agree more with Levinas' later abstraction.

In the notion of the erotic, the future of time (central to the idea of death), is at its very kernel: "voluptuousness is the very event of the future" because "The relationship with the Other is the absence of the other . . . absence in a horizon of the future, an absence that is time" (*Time and the Other* 90). The futurity of death as that which is ungraspable is wrapped up in the radically and irreducibly other, what in *Time and the Other* Levinas calls the "mystery" of the other person. As partially alluded to in *Endgame*, the Other also evokes and interestingly plays out a potent sense of death. Death is here woven through as the most other, as the future that, like Willie, is always looming but never yet present, since with its complete presence the existent is no more. The face of the Other is also the one who calls on the individual from high in *Totality and Infinity* (and which face, like Willie's, is barely glimpsed) evoking the fearful otherness of death. The reference to the Levinasian height (see 1.5.2; 3.3) is here once more pivotal.

Willie is both the frail, boyish other Winnie feels compelled to mother (and as in Levinas the for-the-other in vulnerability also refers to maternity): "Not head first . . . , how are you going to turn? [*Pause*] That's it . . . right round . . . now . . . back in.[*Pause*] Oh I know it is not easy, dear" (*CDW* 147), but he is simultaneously her master. It is on the 'height' imbued by his utterances that Winnie's happiness depends: "Oh you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day!" (*CDW* 146). Winnie is morally singularized, not by herself but despite herself, an-archically, by the Other. Winnie, in facing Willie, is exposed to death but in such exposure she finds herself elected to be a being for Willie, disrupted by what could be construed as a Levinasian command from on high, and asked to desire Willie in the radical passivity of the good will.[254]

"Goodness," continues Levinas, "consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself. Goodness thus involves the possibility for the 'I' that is exposed to the alienation of its powers by death to not be for death" (*Totality and Infinity* 347). Winnie's subjectivity recognizes the 'Thou shalt not kill' commandment

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[254] I bring in the idea of radical passivity in the same spirit in which it is brought in in *Time and the Other* where by *superlative passivity* Levinas means what is more passive than, or prior to, all the syntheses which have hitherto defined time, subjectivity, being, and truth for philosophy.

when, almost testing her potentially violent nature, she asks Willie: "You are going, Willie, aren't you?" [*Pause. Louder*] You will be going soon, Willie, won't you?" (*CDW* 148). Winnie's solitude is thus not confirmed by Willie's presence in its evocation of death. It is, as in *Time and the Other* "broken by it" (74). Death in terms of the alterity of the other person becomes murder.

> Murder at the origin of death, reveals a cruel world, but one to the scale of human relations. The will . . . exposed to death but not immediately, has time to be for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death. This existence for the Other, this Desire of the other, this goodness liberated from the egoist gravitation, . . . retains a personal character. . . The Desire into which the threatened will dissolves no longer defends the powers of a will, but, as the goodness whose meaning death cannot efface, has its centre outside of itself. (*Totality and Infinity* 236)

Indeed Winnie's desire for death by not being for death is inextricably linked to her desperate attempt to hold on to life. As Lacan states, "life and death come together in a relation of polar opposites at the very heart of phenomena that people associate with life" (*Écrits* 261). Winnie persists in appealing to the Other despite the lack of response on the part of Willie who deepens her desire and undergirds her vulnerability. Willie is indeed remote and incomprehensible, experienced by Winnie in the manner of the Freudian superego as an impossible demand, a crushing burden but at the same time overpoweringly intimate, a kind of alterity within her. He is at once proximate, (he manages to hand her back the parasol when it falls) and elusive, too near to avoid but too remote to grasp. Willie confronts and disrupts Winnie's settled location breaking silently but violently into her world, casting her adrift and indirectly summoning her to shoulder the burden of an infinite responsibility on his behalf.

Entangled in this presence, Winnie feels uneasy, invested in guilt and her 'self' totally decentred as, by the second act, she has been sucked further down into the mound up to her neck. She is traumatized and is shaken out of her absorption in the world of things, owing to the impact of a moral force–the asymmetrical "height and destitution" of the Other. Winnie's obligations towards Willie are those of a being-for-the-Other that

moves towards a measureless self-giving. It is what she conceives as Willie's infinity of demand that is so crushing and burdensome yet essential. The alterity of the Other in Willie is not simply recalcitrant to caresses; it is a painful but somewhat positive force whose positivity is a moral rather than an ontological or epistemological force. Faced by this intractable presence Winnie finds temporal transcendence of the present toward the mystery of the future.

Winnie is thus as much a fractured Lacanian split subject perpetually unable to coincide with herself as she is self-defined by her desiring the Other, a Levinasian desire lacking reciprocity and involving asymmetry and abjection, which is incomparably more taxing and perhaps more morally-deserving. Levinas' words are particularly pertinent to conclude with: "Non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future where it escapes itself and loses its position as a subject. Its 'intention' no longer goes forth unto the light, unto the meaningful. Wholly passion, it is compassion for the passivity, the suffering" (*TI* 259).

Winnie finds herself fully and wholly for-the-Other, which notion echoes Leopardi's appeal to address and stand in for the Other's suffering. The Other is indeed both a hostile presence as well as a fellow sufferer and being compassionate towards the Other entails coming to terms with one's own suffering.

Chapter 4

4 The Paradoxical In-Between Space for Desire: Leopardi's and Beckett's Humour

A real comedian - that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they want . . . a true joke . . . has to do more than release tension, *it has to liberate the will and the desire*, it has to change the situation. (Griffiths, *Comedians* 20, my emphasis)

. . . in life and in letters, fate reserved for the fool, oh Shakespeare, the task of keeping accessible the place of truth that Freud brought to light. (Lacan, *Écrits* 554)

While in chapter three Lacanian and Levinasian desire were pitted against each other and read in contradistinction, in this chapter the focus will be specifically on the manifestation of Lacanian desire in Leopardi's and Beckett's similarly conceived dark humour, best expressed through their shared dianoetic laugh. I argue that this humour, together with the previously discussed desire of the O/other, offers to the two writers an antidote to their otherwise pessimistic and nihilistic philosophic outlook (see 2.3; 2.4).

Through their conception of humour the two authors introduce, what we shall term, a paradoxical intermediate space for desire. It is in this dialectic, as amplified below, that humour is closely allied to the reductively termed comic, but also inextricably linked to something unsettling, grimacing and yet, potentially elevating. This *humour noir* has been defined as typical of the Zeitgeist of the previous century (Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* 188).

This grim ribaldry could, at least apparently, be expressed as the sense of the absurd at the root of the characteristic philosophy of existentialism. Nonetheless, both Leopardi and Beckett, as already stated in 2.5, combat existentialist stalemates (in Leopardi's case *ante-litteram*). The humour under discussion thus merits finer

qualification. Massimo Cacciari in *Hamletica* describes the potency of a particularly grim kind of humour, citing as his examples none other than Leopardi and Beckett:

> Il riso del comico . . . non s'abbatte sull'impotenza di caratteri determinati, ma appartiene all'impotenza che segue all'esaurirsi della grande marea delle rappresentazioni . . . E' riso pregno di purissimo *aidos*, di vergogna e *pietas*,che riflette sull'ultimo giorno, sull'unica 'arte' che ne potrebbe seguire. Che ha saputo la fine del pianto tragico e dell'ironia della commedia. Riso *toto corde* leopardiano: 'Quanto piu' l'uomo cresce . . . e crescendo si fa piu' incapace di felicità, tanto egli si fa proclive e domestico al riso, e piu' straniero al pianto.' Riso, a sua volta, opposto a ogni sarcasmo, disincantato anzitutto sulla 'potenza' del proprio disinganno–poiché il disincanto nulla trasforma, cosí come il pensiero di per sé nulla muove. Esso custodisce lo scandalo dell'essere infelice dal ricorrente assalto di ideologie, visioni del mondo, teodicee secolarizzate. Soltanto di opere come quelle di . . . Beckett sarà perciò 'lecito' ridere; soltanto loro lo meritano. (*Hamletica* 106)

> The comedian's laughter . . . does not crush the impotence of certain characters, but it belongs to the impotence that follows the exhaustion of the great tide of representations, . . . it is laughter pregnant with the purest *aidos*, with shame and *pietas* that reflect on the last day, on the only 'art' that could follow. It has come to know the end of the tragic cry and of comic irony. It is laughter that is leopardian *toto corde* 'the more man ages, and ageing he becomes increasingly incapable of happiness, the more he is prone and susceptible to laughter, and the more he becomes a stranger to crying.' It is laughter that is opposed to any sarcasm, and is disenchanted first and foremost by the potency of its own disillusion–in that the disenchantment does not change anything, in the same way that thought in itself does not move anything. It preserves the scandal of being unhappy from the recurrent assault of ideologies, world views, and secularized theodicy. Only works like those written by Beckett justify our laughter; only they deserve our laughter. (my translation)

I argue that this particularly grim humour is succinctly given expression through what in both Leopardi and Beckett comes close to dianoetic laughter. Jacobsen and Mueller state that the dianoetic laugh is directed primarily against the mysterious, malignant outer forces, thereby constituting relief, although the immediate victim of that laugh is the human being who suffers (92). They also claim, however, that the dianoetic laugh is directed against "that which mocks suffering," that is "those malevolent powers which delight in torturing poor mortals" (174) thereby erasing the human victim. Yet surely the human sufferer has the right to wed affliction and wit and promote laughter at her or his own misfortunes. This is a right Leopardi and Beckett support through their portrayal of dianoetic laughter at the crux of which one can construe desire-as-paradox.

It is thus in spite of the remarkable predilection for ataraxic bliss expressed in their work, that Leopardi's and Beckett's characters oftentimes wryly mock their distress, and it is through this mockery that they give expression to desire. Beckett defines the laughter that results from *dianoia* in his novel *Watt* after he gives a short catalogue of laughs:

> Of all the laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs but modes of ululation, only three I think need detain us, I mean the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless. They correspond to successive, how shall I say successive . . . suc . . . successive excoriations of the understanding, and the passage from the one to the other is the passage from the lesser to the greater, from the lower to the higher, from the outer to the inner, from the gross to the fine, from the matter to the form. The laugh that now is mirthless once was hollow, the laugh that once was hollow once was bitter. And the laugh that once was bitter? . . . The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. (47)

The third laugh, however, the "mirthless laugh" is the laugh that concerns us most here. Arsene continues to say that the object of this "mirthless laugh" is neither that which is not good nor that which is not true but "that which is unhappy" (*Watt* 47). The dianoetic laugh, in Arsene's words, is the "laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*," (47). In *Endgame* this

Beckettian principle of resistance is expressed in Nell's statement: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (*CDW* 101). I argue that the mirthless laugh of laughs in Leopardi and Beckett can be conceived through Sigmund Freud's theories (taken up by Lacan) because the humour under question acknowledges and draws strength from human impotence and its radical inner split.

It is thus my contention that Freud's thinking about humour, particularly the revised ideas expressed in his 1927 essay 'Der Humor,' and the way these ideas manifest themselves in Lacan's work, are particularly pertinent to the Leopardian and Beckettian contributions to theories on laughter.[255] What Freud has to say about the drives at the core of humour, and the way desire erupts in Lacan's witticisms and jokes, deserves specific attention in relation to Leopardi's and Beckett's dianoetic laugh.[256] While the humour in question thus goes back specifically to Freud (it is the same notion Simon Critchley exhumes in *On Humour* in his defence of Beckett, whose resistance to nothingness is construed as taking the form of the comic) the desire-as-paradox at the heart of this humour, particularly desire in Beckett, could be construed as Lacanian. Desire in this context is Lacanian in the way (very reductively put) it condenses Freudian 'wish' and 'drive' while adding an elusive supplement. Lacan writes:

> . . . it was certainly the Word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our mental action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it. And we can only think back to this action by allowing ourselves to be driven ever further ahead by it. (*Écrits* 225)

In Beckett, the role of an ambivalent desire as an infinite and paradoxical force that underlies but contemporaneously emerges during the humorous moment is analysed

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[255] Wolfgang Iser in "The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theatre" also argues that Freudian humour is central to Beckett. Surprisingly, it is only Freud's argument in the *Jokes* book that is quoted. Iser construes the theatre of Beckett as one where, at the very moment when we have recognized non-seriousness as a means of self-liberation, it suddenly turns into seriousness again and, at that point, laughter dies on our lips (207). Iser, however, makes the interesting claim that "the function of Beckett's theatre is to engage the spectator in a way that produces for him the experience of self as a decentred subjectivity–the characteristic sign of our times" (202). In *Samuel Beckett*, Birkett and Ince, ed. 201-29.

[256] Morton Gurewitch had already suggested that Freud's thinking about humour yields valuable dividends with regard to Beckett's humour. *The Chicago Review* 33, no.2 (1982): 95.

through old man Krapp's laugh in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) as well as Mouth's reverberating laugh in *Not I* (1972). Both Krapp and Mouth are driven primarily by desire since, I suggest, their motives lie in the language of the body expressed in a body of language that struggles with unconscious desires. On the one hand, desire regresses (and here it is closer to Lacanian demand) to assert that its source holds its very death. On the other hand, it lucidly and satirically moves forward, despite being fully aware that it is directed toward an absence, a something that language cannot attain and contain. This interminable desire is the driving force behind the conflicting and paradoxical forces in Krapp's and Mouth's dark humour. Furthermore, the emergence of desire-as-paradox expressive of the dianoia at the kernel of the echoing laugh, particularly in *Krapp's Last Tape*, contributes to our witnessing a change in the type of comic deployed from beginning to end. In Leopardi, on the other hand, the intertwining of humour and a not entirely discreditable desire is found in passages in his *Operette morali* and in the *Zibaldone*. The role of the Leopardian dianoetic laugh opens a paradoxical in-between space for the infinite movement of desire. Of particular interest in this regard are excerpts in Leopardi's *Zibaldone* and the moral tales "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" and "Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri."

Freud's second revised version of humour, particularly when analysed from a Lacanian perspective, comes conceptually close to the humour expressed by Leopardi's and Beckett's dianoetic laugh. This guffaw at once witnesses the human frailty in all its repressed misery and fights it by laughingly giving expression to such misery, accepting the infinite cyclicality of *physis*. It echoes the humour of pre-Socratic philosophers to which Leopardi referred to as "veramente sostanzioso, esprimeva sempre e metteva sotto gli occhi, per dir cosi, un corpo di ridicolo" ("a humour that was truly substantial, whose expressive potential brought to light, so to speak, that which is essentially ridiculous").[257] Beckett would specifically refer to the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus of Abdera as early as his first published novel *Murphy* (1938), where "in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real" (*Murphy* 246).[258] This dark humour, stemming from Democritus and

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[257] Quoted in Luigi Pirandello, 42, my translation.
[258] Democritus is the first literary protagonist to develop the maniac theme of laughter where madness is wise and wisdom is madness. According to the 'laughing philosopher' one could not but laugh at what he

the pre-Socratic philosophers, woven through the centuries, owes its intricacies to numerous contributions. The humour discussed in this chapter is indeed part of a remarkably long lineage in which both Leopardi and Beckett participate.[259] It is not surprising that Leopardi should contribute to this dark humour which interweaves opposing strands in order to attempt to alleviate "*souffrance*" (see 1.2.1; 2.1).

4.1 *Ride si sapis*: "Ridendo dei nostri mali, trovo qualche conforto"

In *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, Leopardi defines his suffering as more in sync with the desperate pain of Antiquity rather than the Romantic conception of, say, Jean Paul.[260] As mentioned above, Leopardi defends the comicality of pre-Socratic philosophers as opposed to modern notions of the comic. The Italian poet-philosopher, however, is also full of praise for the French comic *esprit*, and this in spite of the fact that he pits the latter against classic humour. As Luigi Pirandello points out in *L'Umorismo*, however, "Il Leopardi . . . parla qui dell'*esprit* francese in contrapposizione del ridicolo classico senza pensare che questo . . . è classico anch'esso" ("Leopardi . . . here speaks of the French *esprit* counterpoising it to the classic humour without realizing that the latter . . . is also classic"; *L'Umorismo* 42; my translation). Thus Leopardi is, at

perceived to be human follies. I argue below that Democritus' insane laughter at the human being's seriousness is however different from, for instance, the Rabelaisian apology of folly. In Democritus the cerebral power is exalted whilst in Rabelais it is the bodily aspect of the laugh that is underlined.

[259] Among the writers who participate in this dark humour, at the heart of which are interwoven conflicting strands, are Friedrich Jean Paul Richter, Nietzsche and Henri Bergson (see 4.2), As Zarathustra teaches: "he who wanteth to kill most thoroughly, *laugheth*" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 387). Bergson underscores that "an absence of feeling" accompanies laughter since it "has no greater foe than emotion" (63). In stating that humour "demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (64), Bergson was depicting humour as a temporary relief from the usual restrictions of social feeling and sanity, thus portraying it as a catalyst of insanity. Nietzsche too will mention this insane aspect of laughter whose bacchanalian joys "want deep, profound eternity" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 397). Freud in his 1927 essay (see 4.3), claims that humour is one of the great series of methods that the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer "a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in madness" ("Humour" 429). Indeed humour is a moment where the senses are closed off to the world, (or, as argued in 4.3, where there is a regress of anti-desire), but one cannot ignore that it is also an empowering moment which comes to terms with human desire. Dark humour is on the one hand a rational and lucid moment where there is an interruption of feeling but, on the other, it is a moment when human fallibility is laughingly acknowledged.

[260] Also see *Zibaldone* 107,1 and 188,1.

one point, construing classic humour, the humour of Democritus and the Pre-Socratics, as shot through with the same dialectical qualities that Jean Paul refers to as both "the annihilating and infinite idea of humour."[261]

Leopardi is indeed fully aware of the empowering quality of dialectical oppositions and his poetics of "*il vago*" and "*l'infinito*" has, as a matter of fact, a dialectical basis (see 1.2.1). The poetical quality of all that is indefinite lies in its being the opposite of the limited reality which the human being faces and his poem "L'Infinito" is the apex of this fusion of opposites. In the *Zibaldone* he explains: "una torre . . . veduta in modo che ella paia innalzarsi sola sopra l'orizzonte, e questo non si veda, produce un contrasto efficacissimo e sublimissimo tra il finito e l'indefinito" ("a tower . . . perceived in such a way that it appears as if it alone soars above the horizon, while the horizon cannot be seen, produces a most effective and sublime contrast between the finite and the indefinite"; *Zibaldone* 953; my translation). Following the contrast in the intertwining of similarly opposite threads in humour, we come face-to-face with one of its *sine qua non* characteristics–ambiguity. Those same ambiguous strings, somewhat frayed by wear, reappear as the threads that knot together this space as, very significantly, an empowering one. Leopardi offers various reflections on humour, some falling under what is known as the superiority theory, others under the so-called theory of incongruity.

In the *Zibaldone* and in *Pensieri,* Leopardi defines laughter as a means of success and integration in the mundane, a superiority that, however, masks only weakness. Perceived from the latter angle, Leopardi's is more of a Hobbesian laugh, a joyless grimace. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* perhaps produced the first superiority theory of

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[261] This starts to explain why at a later stage in *L'Umorismo*, Pirandello will cite specifically Leopardi as a good example of '*umorismo*' as opposed to '*comicita*'', (which recalls, as we shall explain at a later stage, the same Freudian distinction between humour and the comic). On listing Italian *literati* who are truly capable of *umorismo* Pirandello states: "penso a quei certi dialoghi e a quelle certe prosette del Leopardi" ("what comes to mind are some of those dialogues and prose pieces by Leopardi"; *L'Umorismo* 127; my translation). In his 1984 essay "The Frames of Comic Freedom" Umberto Eco also distinguishes between the "comic" and "humour". In Eco the comic operates at the level of the *fabula* (story) while humour operates at the level of discourse. Carla Locatelli uses Eco's theoretical framework to speak about the comic strategies in Beckett. She identifies three phases in Beckett's comic writing between the 1930s and the 1980s: the parodic, the metanarrative and the discursive. She argues that it is in the last that Beckett is at his most original. "Comic Strategies in Beckett's Narratives." *Samuel Beckett*, Birkett and Ince, ed. 233-44.

laughter.[262] While Leopardi proposes a version of this theory in "Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri," it has to be underlined that, to some extent, Plato was already expounding this theory when he questioned the motives behind laughter. The superiority theory of laughter is indeed also in tune with what would become the first definition of Freudian humour in his *Jokes* book, since Hobbes' laugh was more strained and cynical, or better "that passion that hath no name."[263] The superiority theory deals with mockery and was part of a fearful vision of society, offering clues about the maintenance of ideological self-deception. The clear Hobbesian echoes in Leopardi have deep roots. In discouraging the unquestioning acceptance of the goodness of laughter and in hinting at its underlying malice, Hobbes argues for a pleasure that induces one to draw near to the thing that provoked the feeling, and for pain that induces one to "retire from the thing that displeaseth" (*Human Nature* 43). In this line of argumentation, Hobbes outlined an early utilitarian, materialist psychology similar to the one which Leopardi would later expound in his *teoria del piacere* (see 1.2.1).

According to the latter sensationalistic procedure, pleasure and pain stem from need, from the desire for self-preservation (echoed in the Freudian death drive): "E questo amore del piacere è una conseguenza spontanea dell'amor di sé e della propria conservazione" ("And this love of pleasure is a spontaneous consequence of self- love and the urge for self-preservation"; *Zibaldone* 196; my translation). Desire in Leopardi is

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[262] But the dark side of humour is already expounded as far back as antiquity for meanings in comedy are tribally old and theorists like Leopardi and Beckett refine, almost beyond recognition, that same violence in comedy that is indeed primitive. Comedy is a rite transformed into art, or, as Francis M. Cornford puts it, "a scene of sacrifice and a feast" (*The Origin of Attic Comedy* 47). Plato in *Philebus* 47B- 50E intimated as much making reference to *phthonos* or malice which plays an important role in comedy. Peter Berger points to an underlying implication of *phthonos* when he states: "Since malice is hardly an admirable quality, this also raises an ethical issue: Is there something reprehensible about comic laughter?" (18). The Greek festival in honour of *Gelos*, as well as the Festival of *Risus* at the core of the Roman carnival, were, as Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, as much about birth as about death and their crude mockery continued in an unbroken tradition from the ancient world to the carnivals of the medieval period (*The Dialogic Imagination* 52). That these comic protagonists had to be depicted as "worse than the average [since] the comic is a sub-species of the ugly" (*Poetics* 1963 ed. 10), is a view reiterated by, among others, Agnes Heller, who insists that humour and laughter exalt ugliness rather than beauty and, as already stated, rationality over intuition (See Heller 8). In the *schadenfreude* of the comic protagonists' tormentors, receptors poured their savage and sadistic glee at others' misfortunes. Their laughter expressed a disdain roused by seeing someone's mischance, deformity, or ugliness. The latter reaction of laughter constitutes, perhaps, the oldest of theories about humour, the superiority theory (the other two theoretical traditions being the theories of incongruity and release referred to in this chapter).

[263] In *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 61.

founded on this same *amor proprio*, a desire for pleasure that is concerned with both stilling 'unpleasure' as well as seeking pleasure that can never be completely satisfied. Thus it is a desire based on lack.[264] Freud would later expand a similar argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (see 1.3).

The sensationalistic procedure in Leopardi's poetical creation begins from this internal sensation of lack, transforming itself into attention, memory and finally, as argued below, into imagination and judgment. In the poem "La quiete dopo la tempesta" Leopardi gives a negative definition of pleasure, which can be experienced only as the absence of pain. In 1821 Leopardi had already written, "il piacere umano . . . si puo' dire ch'è sempre futuro . . . L'atto proprio del piacere non si da'" ("Human pleasure . . . could be defined as always future . . . The real act of feeling pleasure is never experienced"; *Zibaldone* 414; my translation). The resultant view of human beings and their motives paves the way for Leopardi's idea that the moral beliefs of humankind are really expressions of selfish, material desire. Leopardi writes:

> L'infinità della inclinazione dell'uomo al piacere, è una infinità materiale, e non se ne può dedur nulla di grande o di infinito in favore dell' anima umana, più di quello che si possa in favore dei bruti nei quali è naturale ch'esista lo stesso amore e nello stesso grado, essendo conseguenza immediata dell'amor proprio. (*Zibaldone* 194)

> The infinite human inclination towards pleasure, is a material infinite, and one cannot deduce anything grand or infinite in favour of the human soul, more than what one can deduce in favour of brutes in whom that same love is intrinsic and is expressed in a similar manner, being an immediate consequence of self-love. (my translation)

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[264]Sensation is thus primary in pursuing pleasure and is indeed the parameter by which Leopardi analyzed the formation of human faculties and by which he arrived at the establishment of a hedonistic ethic. As Daniela Bini put it: "the sensationalistic methodology which Leopardi followed strictly led him to a materialistic view of the world" (9). It is not clear whether Leopardi knew Hobbes but he definitely knew that sensationalism and materialism owed much to John Locke who, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, reduced all ideas to sensation.

Leopardi's enquiry on the nature of pleasure is, nonetheless, concluded with his statement that "gli esseri sensibili sono per natura *souffrants*" ("sensitive human beings are by their own nature *souffrants*"; *Zibaldone* 960; my translation). *Amor proprio* constitutes *souffrance,* which is the case with every living, striving organism. This is expressed in the famously terrifying inscription above Leopardi's garden of unhappiness (see 1.1). The complete removal of desire, proposed at a later stage, is explicitly announced in Leopardi's poem "A se stesso" (quoted subsequently by Beckett), which knows its roots and motivations in this inscription. Only distraction through a multitude of chores can drive a wedge between man's insatiable desire of *amor proprio*, and the inevitable *souffrance* to which it leads. In the *operetta morale* "Storia del genere umano," Leopardi points out:

> Bramando sempre e in qualunque stato l'impossibile, tanto più si travagliano con questo desiderio da se medesimi, quanto meno sono afflitti dagli altri mali; deliberò valersi di nuove arti a conservare questo misero genere . . . implicarla in mille negozi e fatiche, ad effetto d'intrattenere gli uomini, e divertirli quanto più si potesse dal conversare col proprio animo, o almeno col desiderio di quella loro incognita e vana felicità. (32-33).

> They [humans] crave the impossible, they always and in any state they found themselves in, crave the impossible, and the more they torment themselves with such desire, the less they are afflicted by other evils; He decided, therefore, to have recourse to chiefly two new expedients for preserving this miserable species . . . to involve men in a thousand activities and a thousand toils so as to occupy them and divert them as much as possible from communing with their own minds–or at least with their desire for an unknown and impalpable happiness. (my translation)

The need to distract oneself from one's own desire implies that a wedge be driven between desire of self-love and unhappiness. In "Detti Memorabili Di Filippo Ottonieri," ("Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri"), the Italian poet-philosopher hints that this same wedge can become the above-mentioned humorous moment. Leopardi insists that

seldom do we laugh at things that are truly laughable but at things that are not really worthy of our laughter; in this way laughter is a manner of distancing and distracting ourselves, and thus a way of keeping ourselves in check from trying to dig deep into the underlying unpalatable truth that we refuse to face. Leopardi thus proposes to suspend desire by slicing open laughter, which conceals the malicious nature of the human being's desires from itself:

> D'infinite cose che nella vita comune, o negli uomini particulari, sono ridicole veramente, è rarissimo che si rida; e se pure alcuno vi si prova, non gli venendo fatto di comunicare il suo riso agli altri, presto se ne rimane. All'incontro, di mille cose o gravissime o convenientissime, tutto giorno si ride, e con facilità grande se ne muovono le risa negli altri. Anzi le più delle cose delle quali si ride ordinariamente, sono tutt'altro che ridicole in effetto; e di moltissime si ride per questa cagione stessa, che elle non sono degne di riso o in parte alcuna o tanto che basti. ("Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri" in *Operette Morali* 322-25)

> There are an infinite number of things in everyday life and in individual men that are extremely ridiculous, and yet they are very seldom laughed at; and if someone laughs at them, as soon as he discovers that he cannot communicate his laughter to others, he quickly desists. On the contrary, we always laugh at many things that are either extremely serious or extremely dignified, and we very easily manage to have others join in our laughter. As a matter of fact, most of the things at which we normally laugh are actually anything but ridiculous; and at a great many of them we laugh for the very reason that they are not worthy of our laughter either in part or in whole.[265]

It is thus a cold and calculating laugh rather than a boisterous one that here veils what lies underneath. Indirectly, this is also a way of asserting both our superiority to the object of laughter as much as the ultimate vacuity of the humorous moment, which has been stripped of anything that comes close to passions or feelings.

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[265] For passages dealing with the same argument see *Zibaldone* 1774 (23 rd September 1821); *Zibaldone*, 3000 (11th July 1823); *Pensieri* CVI.

Sopravvenendo il pericolo, ridere, diventare allegro fuor dell'uso, o più che il momento prima non si era, o di malinconico farsi giulivo; divenir loquace essendo taciturno di natura, o rompere il silenzio fino allora per qualche ragione tenuto; scherzare, saltare, cantare, e simili cose, non sono già segni di coraggio, come si stimano, ma per lo contrario son segni di timori. (*Zibaldone* 3526,1)

In the face of danger, if one laughs or becomes immeasurably and more than ever joyful, or turns from melancholy to mirthful, or becomes loquacious despite having a taciturn temperament, or ruptures the silence up till then held for whatever reason, becoming suddenly jocular, jumping, singing and doing similar things, these are not signs of bravery, as it is thought, but on the contrary, they are signs of fear. (my translation)

But the humour smokescreen in Leopardi is doubly oxymoronic. Desire being directly linked to *amor proprio* and the impossible search for happiness, implies that to cut through humour and reveal the consuming effect of desire, the human being needs to be distanced from his search for happiness and readily admit his insignificance in the face of *physis*. This task, as Farfarello tells Malambruno in "Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello," is impossible:

FARFARELLO: Dunque, amandoti necessariamente del maggiore amore che tu sei capace, necessariamente desideri il più che puoi la felicità propria; e non potendo mai di gran lunga essere soddisfatto di questo tuo desiderio, che e` sommo, resta che tu non possi fuggire per nessun verso di non essere infelice. ("Dialogo di Farfarello e di Malambruno" in *Operette Morali* 100- 101)

Well, then, since of necessity you love yourself with the greatest love of which you're capable, of necessity you desire your happiness as strongly as you can. And since this supreme desire of yours can never be satisfied even in the smallest degree, it follows that in no way can you escape being unhappy.

In "Dialogo della natura e di un anima" Nature echoes the same concept once more underlining the link between *amor proprio* and unhappiness (*Operette morali* 106).

But just as, on the one hand, the drive to pleasure and pain is focused on material desire, on the other hand, that same pleasure and pain can be subsumed in memory from which imagination finally springs. Imagination, possessing sensations in act and remembrance, can create the new. In his *teoria del piacere*, Leopardi places at the forefront the drive exerted by the imagination and the resultant deluding power which is, above all, absolutely necessary. In "Storia del Genere Umano" he speaks about the importance of dreams and illusions (28-9). Leopardi's idealistic aesthetics thus offers resistance to the insufficiency of reality and its lack of purpose which allows man to create his own meaningful world, a world that is acknowledged to be *de facto* a necessary illusion. Senseless matter can be overcome through the exploitation of that very recognition. As discussed above, that same garden which evokes images of beauty and harmony hides but suffering and death and reflects how life perpetuates itself through death. Leopardi overcomes this paradoxical principle by subsuming it into a higher paradox: indeed that of a dianoetic laugh. Laughter is a celebration of the deluding but necessary power of the imagination in the face of the recognition of nothingness.

Rather than the humour smokescreen, then, the attenuation of human pain is possible through the Leopardian dianoetic laugh where the human being accepts suffering, concomitantly empowering oneself by resorting to the stormy depths of the imagination.[266] The weapons of the ridiculous are used to deconstruct the weapons of pure rationality. In the *Zibaldone* he writes:

> Ne' miei dialoghi io cercherò di portar la commedia a quello che finora è stato proprio della tragedia, cioe' i vizi dei grandi, i principii fondamentali delle calamità e della miseria umana . . . E credo che le armi del ridicolo, massime in questo ridicolissimo e freddissimo tempo . . . potranno giovare più . . . Cosí a scuotere la mia povera patria, e secolo, io mi troverò avere impiegato le armi dell' immaginazione nella lirica, e in quelle prose letterarie ch'io potrò scrivere; le armi della ragione, della logica, della filosofia, ne' trattati filosofici ch'io dispongo; e

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[266] While the drive to pleasure and pain is focused on material desire, that same pleasure and pain can be subsumed in memory from which imagination finally springs. Imagination, possessing sensations in act and remembrance, can create the new.

le armi del ridicolo ne' dialoghi e novelle Lucianee ch'io vo preparando.
(*Zibaldone* 1394)

In my dialogues I will attempt to bring into comedy that which has been so far
subject matter of tragedy, that is the vices of the great ones, the principal causes
of human calamities and miseries . . . And I believe that the weapons of the
ridiculous, particularly in this most ridiculous and glacial of times . . . would be
more beneficial . . . Thus in order to shake my poor country, and the century in
which I live, I will have to resort to the weapons of the imagination in my poems,
and in the literary prose works that I will be writing: the weapons of reason, logic,
philosophy in the philosophical treatises that I will pen; and the weapons of the
ridiculous in the dialogues and Lucianesque short stories that I am preparing. (my
translation)

Counterpoising the Hobbesian echoes of superiority theory in his excerpts about
humour,[267] Leopardi thus strives to uncover what his "secol superbo e sciocco" ("proud
and foolish century"; "La Ginestra" line 53) did not have the courage to face, pointing out
the importance of humorously acknowledging this foolishness.[268] Hence, following the
long lineage of philosophers starting with the above-mentioned Democritus, Leopardi's
conception of one of the functions of humour is that of offering a shield against the
heritage of man's ancient impotence in nature's presence. This is the result of a
perspective based on the idea of incongruity,[269] a response to Hobbes' austere notion of
humour. In Leopardi, as in Democritus, insanity is wisdom and the world is ultimately a
fable that nourishes illusions. On December 17, 1823 Leopardi writes: "Tutto è follia in
questo mondo fuorché il folleggiare. Tutto è degno di riso fuorché il ridersi di tutto. Tutto
è vanità fuorché le belle illusioni e le dilettevoli frivolezze" ("Everything is insane in this
world except for behaving insanely. Everything is worth being laughed at except for

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[267] These ideas were opposed by eighteenth-century British philosophers like Lord Shaftesbury for whom
humour was the very height of reasonableness.
[268] In Leopardian prose, "allegrezza" (cheerfulness) is not disjuncted from "tristezza" (sadness). The
relationship between physical reaction and passion reflects the influence of the *idéologues* (Tracy,
Cabanis). See 1.2.1.
[269] The basic idea of incongruity theory was that two different ideas would be suddenly connected with
comic effect. Immanuel Kant phrases the incongruity theory in a brilliant short discussion of laughter from
The Critique of Judgement where humour is a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing (196-203).

laughing at everything. Everything is vanity except for the beautiful illusions and the pleasant frivolities"; *Zibaldone* 3990; my translation).[270]

It is in this paradoxical but highly creative zone, where one laughs at the engulfing misery of one's ephemeral physicality that the Leopardian humour mentioned by Pirandello in *L'Umorismo* (42) comes to life.[271] Through this very humour the nihilistic notion regarding the human being's doom is fought. Indeed, for Leopardi, humour acts like a double-edged sword. While it offers strong resistance to the ubiquitous earthly delusions and to the consuming effect of desire, acting as a buffer between the human being and his passions, it is also the only conceivable way to respond to the trials and tribulations of life, paradoxically allowing expression to the desiring self. Indeed Leopardi's humour is worked through a tongue-in-cheek kind of writing whereby the laughter of his so-called 'cosmi-comic' writing faces the stark confrontation between its fable-like quality and the finitude of the physical world.

In Freud's words humour is "the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego" ("Humour" 432), or in Lacan's words "Humour betrays the very function of the superego in comedy" (*Écrits* 648). Leopardi's humorous attitude towards oneself thus prefigures Freud's humour (see 4.3) which turns the oedipalist concept on its head. As Freud points out, the superego treats the ego as one treats oneself as a child from an adult perspective, recognizing and laughing at one's insignificance. Leopardi and Freud indeed interpret that same impudence of humour not simply as an act of superiority (and in Freud, as already mentioned, it is a superiority with clear oedipalist echoes), but also as a mode of representation through the opposite, an ability to laugh in the face of adversity. This humour is superior to the laughter of superiority, which, on its own, is simply the expression of repressed desire and unconscious aggression ("Humour" 429).

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[270] In "Storia del genere umano" Leopardi explores the importance of dreams and illusions (*Operette morali* 28-9).

[271] As stated at the beginning of 4.1, in *L'Umorismo*, Pirandello specifically cites Leopardi as a good example of '*umorismo*' as opposed to '*comicità*', (which recalls, as explained in 4.3, the same Freudian distinction between humour and the comic).

In May 1825 Leopardi gives expression to this laugh of dianoia: "quanto più l'uomo cresce . . . e crescendo si fa più incapace di felicità, tanto egli si fa proclive e domestico al riso, e più straniero al pianto" ("the more the human being ages, and ageing he becomes increasingly incapable of happiness, the more is he prone and susceptible to laughter, and a stranger to crying"; *Zibaldone* 4138; my translation). This is a dignified ageing laugh that is echoed in Eleandro's "la disperazione [che] ha sempre nella bocca un sorriso" ("despair [that] always carries a smile on its lips"; "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" 404-406). It is a dignified smile that acknowledges and bravely takes stock of human weaknesses, not precluding the infinite human predisposition to desire in vain. The Leopardian ageing laugh and his dignified, desperate smile is imbued with value in the way the laughter of superiority is not, because through it one can, at least partially, find solace. The Leopardian desperate smile and ageing laugh form part of the thread that leads up to Freudian humour, particularly as envisaged according to the latter's second topography.

In the classical *quaestio*−whether it would be better to laugh or cry when confronted with the misfortunes and unhappiness of the world–for Leopardi's Eleandro, the obvious choice is the aforementioned Democritian laughter, central to Leopardi as also to Beckett, a guffaw that laughs madly at the ills of the physical world:

> Ridendo dei nostri mali, trovo qualche conforto; e procuro di recarne altrui nello stesso modo. Se questo non mi vien fatto, tengo pure per fermo che il ridere dei nostri mali sia l'unico profitto che se ne possa cavare, e l'unico rimedio che vi si trovi. ("Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro," *Operette Morali* 406-7)

> Laughing at our ills gives me some comfort and helps me to bring some to others. Even If I could not do this, I would still remain thoroughly convinced that laughing at our ills is the only benefit we can draw from them and the only remedy we can find in them.

4.2 From Leopardi to Freud: Incongruity Theory in Schopenhauer, Bergson and Lewis

As discussed in the previous chapters, Schopenhauer is the immediate heir of Leopardi and this influence is also clear in the Schopenhauerian version of the incongruity theory. Schopenhauer, echoing Leopardi, argued that "understanding . . . transforms dull, meaningless sensation into intuition" (*The World as Will and Representation* 1: 33). It is not through rationality but through intuition that humanity can start to comprehend its infinitesimal insignificance and, at that realization, it can only laugh at its own complete impotence. Henri Bergson, discussed below, will echo the same feeling when he states that: "the specific remedy for vanity is laughter . . . the one failing that is essentially laughable" (173). Freud would later recognize debt, particularly to Schopenhauer, claiming that the latter not only asserted "the dominance of the emotions and the supreme importance of sexuality but he was even aware of the mechanism of repression" (*Historical and Expository Works* 244).

In the brief section on humour in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer, along with Leopardi, reveals to be one of the first to define what comes close to the romantic irony of the desolately-smiling marginalized man. He proposed that:

> laughter arises from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept; in fact laughter itself is simply the expression of this incongruity . . . All laughter is occasioned by a paradoxical and hence unexpected subsumption, irrespective of whether it is expressed in words or deeds." (*The World as Will and Representation* 84)

Schopenhauer divides the ridiculous in "either a witty conceit or an act of foolishness, according to whether there is a movement from the discrepancy between objects to the unity of a concept or the other way around: the former is always voluntary, the latter always involuntary and is forced on people only from outside" (85). As is the case with Leopardian humour, the art of the real humourist is that of tacitly masking wit as

foolishness. Schopenhauer specifically mentions the court jester or the Fool (as will do Lacan) as the one who deliberately switches the two around, referring to the time-honoured sage veiled as a Fool.[272]

This brings us back to another influential version of the incongruity theory, this time by Bergson. According to Bergson, laughter is more visual than verbal, whereby "the body tak[es] precedence of the soul . . . the manner seeking to outdo the matter, the letter aiming at ousting the spirit" (94). The prototypes of the comic tend to be wordless, slapstick humour whose comicality is experienced at the fringe of intuitions.[273] Bergson's is a reaction to an automation which stings us with its strangeness whereby "the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79). Thus, the comic is "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (84) and "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing" (97). This mechanization-in-the-making contains "a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring, and . . . delights in repressing the feeling anew" (108). The act of repressing and releasing can be equated to that same infinite desire at once

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[272] The mirth of the consumed, frustrated Fool reaches its shrillest pitch in Nietzsche who, like Leopardi, Schopenhauer and later Freud, equates laughing with the ability to suffer excruciatingly. But Nietzsche's direst, most inward sickness is the thwarting of will, the shrill laugh of Silenus who states that what would have been best for the human being is "not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best is to die soon" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 29). The mad laugh is once more tapped by Charles Baudelaire, as a source of great creativity. In 'The Essence of Laughter', similar to Hobbes' and some of Leopardi's notions, Baudelaire states that laughter springs from the idea of one's own perceived superiority. It is, however, primarily a symptom of one's failing. Baudelaire places at the root of this accursed grin the miscreants of the character Melmoth created by Reverend Maturin. Laughter is, according to Baudelaire, a sign of superiority in relation to brute creation but a sign of inferiority in relation to the wise (154). Baudelaire describes the latter as the "absolute comic" (157) as opposed to the ordinary type termed "significative" (157). The association of madness with the creative process is also crucial in Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (187). Kayser argues that the abysmal, ominous humour of the mechanical object, who is alienated by being brought to life, (and thus the mechanical liveliness of the puppet, the marionette, the automaton, the face frozen into a mask), counteracts the human being who is, in this vein, increasingly projected as deprived of such life. Mad laughter is also central to Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin states that the negation in the comic is a negation of an entire order of life through which there occurs, paradoxically, an affirmation (322). For Bakhtin humour is also an explosive life-force burst of desire, mainly expressed with the body. This conception of the mad laugh as a bodily explosion, which in its emphasis on the physicality differs from the Democritian laughter central to Leopardi and Beckett, is conveyed by a whole tradition extending not only from Rabelais and the *commedia dell'arte* to Baudelaire and Bakhtin, but also includes André Breton and Helmuth Plessner (see 4.5).

[273] Bergson's appreciation of wordless, bodily humour owes perhaps to the tradition of Mime, Mask and Caricature but it differs, for instance, from the aforementioned Bakhtinian carnivalesque aesthetic. Bergson never champions the vulgar since comedy "oscillates between life and art" (74).

repressed and released, lodged at the core of the humorous moment under discussion: "a particular mechanical arrangement which it reveals to us, as through a glass, at the back of the series of effects and causes" (116). Bergson goes on to describe the "mechanical combination to be generally reversible" (114). In this he prefigures Wyndham Lewis. The mechanical quality is the result of a human desire at once repressed but also attempting a release and creating a situation that belongs simultaneously to two aspects: the human attempting to be non-human and (and here comes the anticipation of Lewis) the non-human in which human qualities can be detected.[274]

The laughable aspect of a thing that gives its viewer the impression of a human is the position argued for by Lewis. In a brief essay, written, like Freud's, in 1927 and entitled "The Meaning of the Wild Body", Lewis writes against Bergson:

> . . . with a denial of 'the person', life becomes immediately both 'real' and very serious. To bring vividly to our mind what we mean by 'absurd,' let us turn to the plant, and enquire how the plant could be absurd. Suppose you came upon an orchid or a cabbage reading Flaubert's *Salambô* or Plutarch's *Moralia*, you would be very much surprised. But if you found a man or a woman reading it, you would not be surprised. (158-59)

Lewis' laughable thing-become-person is clearly a reversal of Bergson's person-become-thing but beyond this simple reversal, Lewis is making a more poignant remark on humour. He continues,

> Now in one sense you ought to be just as much surprised at finding a man occupied in this way as if you had found an orchid or a cabbage, or a tom-cat, to include the animal world. There is the same physical anomaly. It is just as absurd

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[274]This is, once more, the same space which allows the previously mentioned Bakhtinian inversion of the normal order of things, the playfulness of the mind and the transposition of the natural expression of an idea into another key. This is the same *dolce far niente* of stock characters in the *commedia dell'arte*. Nonetheless, as previously-discussed, this in-between space only apparently gives rise to play. It is about very serious business and Bergson speaks of the humorous moment as a "corrective" (117).

externally . . . The deepest root of the Comic is to be sought in this anomaly. (159)

The root of the comic is then not so much a thing behaving like a person but a person acting like a person. There is something quintessentially ridiculous about a person taking his or her human role seriously. Humour is not just a process of safeguarding pleasure against the denials of reason, which is wary of pleasure. Freud's analysis dovetails Bergson's but, in a way, also Lewis's. Freud does not simply convey the message that laughter is not necessarily an honest reflection of the soul, as he expounds in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In his essay written in the same year as Lewis', Freud speaks of the superego who laughs at the ego, an internal human mechanism whereby one refuses to take oneself seriously. The magnanimity of humour in Freud's 1927 essay goes beyond any notion of a malicious desire that is repressed beneath a humorous front.

4.3   Freudian Humour: The Blossomed Leopardian Seed within Victorian Relief Theory

A malevolent dimension is characteristic of the relief theory of humour, whose origins lie within the materialist philosophy of the nineteenth century.[275] Not surprisingly, more than one parallel can be drawn with some of Leopardi's conceptions of humour. At the core of relief theory one can detect the basic elements of the first version of Freudian theory of laughter which echoes not just Victorian writers of humour but also, among others, Leopardi, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The latter three writers had already explored many ideas about human intuitions and desire that Freud came to propose.

The universality of human strivings expressed as the death-drive pitted against life-drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 1.3; 1.4.2; 4.1), Reisner's

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[275] The laughter at the heart of Victorian Relief Theory, whose pleasures are once more seen as not entirely estimable, appears, for instance, in the nonsense genre, particularly in innocent-looking, unsuspicious works like the *Book of Nonsense* by Edward Lear. Nonsense is based on that same Bakhtinian 'topsyturvydom' and dwells on the incongruities that result from turning the world of sense, rules and plausibility upside down. Laughter in this case represents a rebellion against order, a temptation to a dangerous moment of anarchy against the severe demands of social constraint.

anti-desire struggling against desire (21), or Lacanian Imaginary demand pitted against Symbolic desire enact that same tension in Freud between the need to restore to an earlier state of things and a perennially insatiable desire to placate the desire of self-assertion (see 1.3). I argue below that this same tension is crucial to humour. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes an important remark about the relation between the comic and repression:

> Evidence, finally, of the increase in activity which becomes necessary when these primary modes of functioning are inhibited is to be found in the fact that we produce a comic effect, that is, a surplus of energy which has to be discharged in laughter, if we allow these modes of thinking to force their way through into consciousness. (766)

The claim here is that one produces a surplus of energy in laughter when repressed unconscious material threatens to force its way through into consciousness. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud delves deeper into the argument. He proposes that the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity. It is also in the *Jokes* book that Freud specifically distinguishes between the comic and humour.[276] Freud states that "what are quite especially unfavourable for the comic are all kinds of intellectual processes . . . There is no place whatever left for the comic in abstract reflection except when that mode of thought is suddenly interrupted." (*Jokes* 219). But Freud dissects the comic further and counterpoises it to humour:

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[276] It is Freud's same distinction between humour and the comic that lies at the core of *'L'Umorismo'* ('On Humour'), Luigi Pirandello's essay written in 1908. Among other sources of '*L'Umorismo*' is Theodor Lipps' 'Komik und Humor' (1898), which is also mentioned by Freud (*Jokes and their Relation to Unconscious* 202). For Pirandello, feeling is the pivot of his philosophy, adopting the anti-intellectual tradition of Western thought represented by the already-mentioned lineage of Jean Paul, Leopardi, Schopenhauer and Bergson, all quoted in *'L'Umorismo'*. Pirandello claims that the comic, namely the "avvertimento del contrario" (the "perception of the opposite") should not be confused with humour, namely "il sentimento del contrario" ("the feeling of the opposite"; *L'Umorismo* 135; my translation). As in Leopardi's theory of humour, Pirandello in *'L'Umorismo'* makes rationality crumble plunging the human being into a darkness which, however, is not complete. The Pirandellian laugh indeed laughs at life which is unpredictable but whose elusiveness does not impede, as in Leopardi, a feeling for it.

> The comic is greatly interfered with if the situation from which it ought to develop gives rise at the same time to a release of strong affect . . . Yet precisely in cases where there is a release of affect one can observe a particularly strong difference in expenditure bring about the automatism of release [. . . these are] case[s] in which laughter occurs in circumstances other than pleasurable ones and accompanied by intensely distressing or strained emotions. (*Jokes* 221)

If the release of distressing affects is, as Freud puts it "the greatest obstacle to the emergence of the comic" (228), humour is "a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place" (228). The conditions of humour are given when "we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect in *statu nascendi*." (*Jokes* 228). Freud goes on to pay homage to disaster humour and its variant, gallows humour−where the threat of death and facts of human catastrophe are transformed into the material for jokes. Humour is then, according to Freud's first model proposed in the *Jokes* book, what Critchley terms "[a] symptom . . . of societal repression . . . a return of the repressed" (*On Humour* 12).

In the *Jokes* book Freud already pursued the attempt to discover the essence of humour, in a preconscious link and a comparison with puerile pleasure. Despite being a defence mechanism, Freud asserted that humour goes beyond the arch-defence process of repression. Indeed, he explains, humour "scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence." Humour brings this change about by finding a means of "withdrawing the energy from the release of un-pleasure that is already in preparation and of transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure" (*Jokes* 233). Unpleasant feelings are thus transformed and released during the humorous moment. It is no wonder that death and suffering are spoken of with utter humour in many of Leopardi's *Operette morali* as well as Beckett's plays. Freud offers this explanation to such transformation during the humorous moment:

The species of humour are extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on. Their number seems to remain uncompleted because the kingdom of humour is constantly being enlarged whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto unconquered emotions to the control of humour, in making them, . . . into sources of humorous pleasure. (*Jokes* 232)

It is, however, in his later essay "Humour" that Freud adds, very significantly, that humour allows one not only to release repressed emotion, desire not precluded, and derive pleasure out of it, but to laugh at oneself, taking stock of one's fallacies which leads to an elevating feeling. The humour proposed in this revised version comes close to the concept of the dianoetic laugh. In his 1927 essay Freud concludes that humour is the contribution made to the comic by the inflated position of the super-ego, who reassuringly laughs at the ego. Baudelaire had already alluded to this splitting that takes place during the humorous moment when he comments: "the man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego" (154).[277]

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[277] The splitting of the human interior during the humorous moment, echoing Freud's dialectic between ego and super ego, is primary in Jean Paul's *Preschool of Aesthetics*, particularly in a section dealing with "the annihilating or infinite idea of humour,"(*Jean Paul: A Reader* 253). It is significant, nonetheless, that this humour is defined once more through an oxymoron: it is at once infinite and devoid of anything, recalling the aforementioned dialectic of opposites so central to Leopardi's poetics (see 4.1). It is humour as the "inverse sublime" (*Jean Paul: A Reader* 250). Freud would also refer to the "degradation of the sublime" which creates "the comparison between this new ideational method . . . and the previously habitual one . . .this comparison . . . creates the difference in expenditure which can be discharged by laughter" (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* 201). As Jean Paul states, "humour might seem to border on madness, which takes leave of its senses naturally, as the philosopher artificially, but like the latter, keeping its reason; humour is, as the ancients dubbed Diogenes, a raving Socrates" (*Jean Paul: A Reader* 259). This contradictoriness is also highlighted by Baudelaire who states that "Laughter is satanic: It is thus profoundly human . . . and since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory" (*On the Essence of Laughter* 153). Jean Paul also delves into the satanic aspect in humour, the devil being "usually the tomfool" (253). Nietzsche echoes this thought: "night is also a sun-go away! Or ye will learn that a sage is also a fool" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 396). Humour, according to Kayser, is "filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter" (187). This satanic aspect is also raised by Bergson who speaks of the comic art as having "a touch of the diabolical, rais[ing] up the demon who had been thrown by the angel" in that it divines "beneath the skin-deep harmony of form . . . the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter" (77).

André Breton, directly inspired by Freud's 1927 paper, would call this humour *l'humour noir* (1). Indeed black humour is replete with the unhappy black bile, the medieval melan-cholia, to which Freud attributes a mental state expressed as the suppression of the ego by the usually cruel (in the case of *humour noir*, not-so-cruel) super-ego ("Humour" 431). This humour has, as Freud specifies, "something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation" ("Humour" 428) which is why it comes conceptually close to dianoetic laughter. This elevation, also of primary importance in Leopardi, serves to bring out an interesting contrast between Freud's revised notion of humour that echoes the cerebral resistance of *dianoia*, and what he had stated in his *Jokes* book. Freud's revised notion is empowering in that it brings about a change of situation where the real is 'surrealized', which is why Breton was so interested in *l' humour noir*. According to the latter conception, unlike the humour of jokes, one laughs at oneself and acknowledges this in a dignified humorous attitude. Freud continues to explain: "Humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes" ("Humour" 429). The grandeur of such a humorous moment lies, as Freud concludes, in the triumph of narcissism ("Humour" 428). And with the triumph of the ego comes also that of the previously- mentioned Freudian 'pleasure principle.'

But it is precisely here that the line of argumentation merits further scrutiny. It cannot be ignored that in the same 1927 essay, Freud states that, "the putting through of the pleasure principle- bring [s] humour near to the regressive or reactionary processes" (429). As already stated (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 1.3; 4.1), the pleasure principle emerges from the reactionary mechanism of "a return to the peace of the inorganic world," (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 166) but also, as Freud specifies, "the pleasure-principle however remains for a long time the method of operation of the sex impulses" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 143). One cannot thus overlook that the pleasure principle in Freud operates at the heart of the dualistic theory of death and life forces (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 167). Reisner underlines that death and life are both goals of desire (*Death Ego*14). This thought adds an interesting twist to the matter. As much as the regressive, reactionary forces of that "opposition to desire within the ego" are crucial to this humour, one cannot ignore that struggling against this force is the "desire which supersedes the ego." Humour thus lies not only near to the regressive process, or, as Freud defines it in

the same essay, to the ego which refuses to be wiped out by the surrounding engulfing distress, but it also has to struggle against an opposite force of desire, "the keenest threat to the sovereignty of the ego" (*Death Ego* 34).

In the 1927 essay then, Freud affirms that humour conceals repressed desire ("Humour" 429), without, however, also highlighting its opposing force. Humour indeed strives to allow that same "desire which supersedes the ego" (*Death Ego* 34), to break through the pressure weighing down on it. The way repressed desire erupts in humour is through language–a language also made up of witticisms and puns. It is a language characterized by lack, by the inability to grasp the underlying unconscious desires. Language can only signify a coming to terms with a loss, ultimately the lack-of-being, or the desire that is "desire for desire, the Other's desire," that defines the Lacanian split subject (*Écrits* 723).

If, at this point, we bring in as supplement to Freud the Lacanian registers of human experience, the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real orders of being (see 1.4; 4.4 below), some crucial distinctions can be made between the energies, actions and expressions of the dual movement of desire at the core of this humour.

4.4   Lacan on Humour

Freudian humour paves the way for Lacan's views on the duality of the 'self' and the role of this splitting particularly as manifested in witticisms. Lacan points out the central theme of the breach, resulting in the internal conflict within the 'self' on various occasions: "If we ignore the self's radical ex-centricity to itself with which man is confronted, in other words, the truth discovered by Freud, we shall falsify both the order and the methods of psychoanalytic mediation" (*Écrits* 171). The radical internal breach that defines the individual's ex-centricity, his or her being off the centre and thus the radical split within the human subject is caused by desire which renders that same subject darkly humorous or tragicomic:

> The pathetic side . . . the counterpart of tragedy. They are not incompatible since tragi-comedy exists. That is where the experience of human action resides. And it

is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible. (*Seminar VII* 314)

The tragicomic resides within the human inner split, within the human being's inability to come to terms with the overwhelming force that is desire. Starting off by quoting Freud on jokes and then concluding with his own remarks, Lacan surmises:

> For, however little interest has been taken in it–and for good reason–*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* remains the most unchallengeable of his [Freud's] works because it is the most transparent; in it, the effect of the unconscious is demonstrated in all its subtlety. And the visage it reveals to us is that of wit in the ambiguity conferred on it by language, where the other face of its regalia power is the witticism, by which the whole of its order is annihilated in an instant–the witticism, indeed, in which language's creative activity unveils its absolute gratuitousness, in which its domination of reality is expressed in the challenge of nonmeaning, and in which the humour, in the malicious grace of the free spirit, symbolizes a truth that does not say its last word . . . Nowhere is the individual's intent more evidently surpassed by the subject's find–nowhere is the distinction I make between the individual and the subject so palpable–since not only must there have been something foreign to me in my find for me to take pleasure in it, but some of it must remain foreign for this find to hit home. This takes on its importance due to the necessity, so clearly indicated by Freud, of a joke's third person, who is always presupposed, and to the fact that a joke does not lose its power when told in the form of indirect speech. In short, this points, in the Other's locus. (*Écrits* 223-24)

Without an understanding of the fact of desire and the unconscious, the human being is susceptible to losing what little control he or she has in a world in which mastery is elusive. A search for mastery and unity is not only destined to fail but is also where the tragicomic destiny of humanity is, as it were, lodged. Knowledge of the fictions of the

Lacanian Real and the power of the unconscious allow us to better come to terms with our tragicomic selves.

At this point supplementing Freud's revised theory of humour with Lacan's theory of the registers (see 1.4.1) can elucidate our line of argumentation. Indeed, the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order entails a loss: a loss of "the Other's desire since it is originally desire for what the Other desires" (*Écrits* 662). And if an intrinsic link can be traced between the Imaginary and the death drive, on the one hand, and the Symbolic and the life drive, on the other, then the Imaginary involves a yielding, while the Symbolic entails play. The latter is, however, a play of signifiers which, as in the *fort/da* game described in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is a presence playing on an absence. To regress to the Imaginary is to turn away from desire, to lose and undo desire, Reisner's "anti-desire" (*Death Ego* 21). This is the desire to cease desiring, the "ablation of desire" that I initially refer to (see introduction). The Symbolic, on the other hand, progresses by the finding of desire, but significantly this desire "comes from the Other" (*Écrits* 724).

The humour under discussion, the humour expressed through the laugh of *dianoia*, construed by deploying Lacanian tools, results in a struggle between Imaginary desire, which forcefully attempts to still the current and stop it mid-stream, and Symbolic desire which fights back satirically. Freud's insistence that "humour is not resigned; it is rebellious" ("Humour" 429), and is inextricably linked to something elevating ("Humour" 428), acquires new meaning when perceived in this light.

4.5   Beckett's Humour

Beckett's humour is characterized by the same "mirthless laugh" referred to previously, the laughter that, as Critchley puts it, "opens us up and causes our defenses to drop momentarily, but it is precisely at that moment of weakness that Beckett's humour rebounds upon the subject" (*On Humour* 49).[278] Critchley defines it as the "subtle but

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[278] Simon Critchley chooses to define Beckett's laughter as resulting from "humour that resists direct translation and can only be thematized humourlessly" (*Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* 157). It is humour

devastating force of Beckett's humour" (*Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* 157). Christopher Ricks links Beckett's comic to death stating that "Beckett's apprehension of death . . . is unsurprisingly the lens of his translucent comedy" (20), an argument that echoes a one-sided Freud. Shane Weller disagrees with the argument that Beckett's humour is a form of resistance to nihilism. On the contrary he argues humour in Beckett might be masking nihilism just because it is the last place where you would expect to find it. As he eloquently puts it, deliberately echoing Nietzsche, Beckettian humour might be "just a function of nihilism's uncanniness" (*A Taste for the Negative Beckett and Nihilism* 143).Yet, all this criticism still begs the following question: what does Beckett's work say about humour? In *Molloy* Moran debates the point with Father Ambrose,

> Like Job haha, he said. I too said haha. What a joy it is to laugh, from time to time, he said. Is it not? I said. It is peculiar to man, he said. So I have noticed, I said. A brief silence ensued . . . Animals never laugh, he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said. What? He said. It takes us to find that funny, I said loudly. He mused. Christ never laughed either, he said, so far as we know. He looked at me. Can you wonder? I said. (93)

In typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, humour is here being attributed to human beings. Critchley pin-points precisely this element when, referring to Helmuth Plessner, he explains the specifically human element of humour as follows,

> As Plessner puts it, laughter confirms the eccentric (*exzentrisch*) position of the human being in the world of nature. Plessner's thesis is that the life of animals is *zentrisch*, it is centred. This means that the animal simply lives and experiences (*lebt und erlebt*). By contrast, the human being not only lives and experiences, he or she experiences those experiences (*erlebt sein Erleben*). That is, the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself. This is

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expressed in the "syntax of weakness, as a comic syntax" (*On Humour* 49) and that constitutes an "acknowledgement of finitude" (*Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* 159). The genius of Beckett's humour, continues Critchley, is that "he makes us laugh and then calls us into question through that laughter" (*On Humour* 41).

why humans are eccentric, because they live beyond the limits set for them by
nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience. . . . The working
out of the consequences of the eccentric position of the human is the main task of
a philosophical anthropology, which is why laughter has such an absolutely
central role in Plessner's work (28).

The human's return to a 'centric' position, to animal-like sheer immediacy stands out as anomalous because the human being has an ex-centric position vis-à-vis itself. The human being's ex-centricity, its ability to be reflective about itself explains the cynical, brooding, black misanthropy of some excerpts in Leopardi as also the Beckettian mirthless laugh. The ex-centricity of this humour, however, also recalls the Lacanian split self in its tragicomic fate, unable to come to terms with its own desire.

Thus, as Beckett specifies, humour is human and, as he shows through his work, its effect banks on its ex-centric quality. Human beings are eccentric animals defined by their continual failure to coincide with themselves, and particularly with their bodies. As Critchley states, "humour takes place in the gap between being a body and having a body" (*On Humour* 44). The body, in all its crude desire, is what returns in humour. The tension that holds this humour together is rife because of the incongruity between the attempt to repress and close off the body, and the explosive nature of its sheer materiality. This tension is very evident in, for instance, the scene from Molloy where the latter concocts a mathematical analysis of his farting (*Molloy* 30).

The body, however, is not here being idealized, an accusation Critchley (to a degree justifiably) launches at Bakhtin (*On Humour* 51). The body that is object and subject of humour is disoriented, estranged and failing. It is a body that laughs but is troubled by what it laughs at. That same wedge driven between *amor proprio* and unhappiness in Leopardi is filled specifically with this laughter. It is a laugh that imperceptibly and restlessly agitates, shattering any possibility of inner peace since it is a relic of the radical ex-centricity of man.

It is not, however, the laughter Theodor Adorno perceives in *Endgame* where he concludes that this is "what has become of humour after it has grown obsolete as an

aesthetic medium and revolting without a canon of the truly humorous, without a place of reconciliation from where one could laugh, without anything left between heaven and earth that is really harmless, that would permit itself to be laughed at" ("Towards an Understanding of *Endgame*" 98). The laugh in Beckett's oeuvre is dianoetic. It celebrates cerebral power but it cannot, on its own, laugh off adversity. Freudian revised humour that accompanies this laugh is, as a matter of fact, essential.

4.5.1 The Humorous Resistance: *Krapp's Last Tape*

Laughing at our ills, or in Winnie of *Happy Days'* words, "laughing wild amid severest woe" (*CDW* 150),[279] is Beckett's attempt to offer resistance against earthly insignificance. This resistance is particularly strong in the grotesque comedy deployed in Beckett's drama. *Krapp's Last Tape* offers what could be construed as a craftily-nuanced portrayal of that same "force of desire which supersedes the ego" that intriguingly attempts to surface in the grim humour of "wearish old man" Krapp (*CDW* 215). This humour is inextricably interlaced to the ubiquitously repressed desire of not simply the old man, but also his younger self on tape who, in his turn, simultaneously wishes to both retrieve and ablate entire years sprouting from his past. Through his dark humour, Old Krapp both retreats from the fast-encroaching darkness (literal and metaphorical) which, following his listening, almost threatens to engulf him, but he also attempts to brace for the final "on" of his last tape. At the experiential kernel of Old Krapp's humour, as is the case in Leopardi's humour, it is desire-as- paradox that has taken root. It is repressed desire as well as the necessary continuation of desire, the infinite desire that will maintain its quest. In Beckett's play this desire could be construed as corresponding to Lacan's notion of the desire for the Other, which finds its locus in language. Lacan writes:

> Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within
> itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light
> the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the
> Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack
> (*Écrits* 263).

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[279] Winnie is here echoing Thomas Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College.*

The voice on tape can be conceived of as such a complement from the Other in relation to old Krapp. The intricate relationship that slowly unfolds between old Krapp and the voice towards which he directs his longing to "be again" can be appropriated to Lacan's understanding of desire as lack-of-being. The concept of paradoxical and infinite desire is thus illuminated as old Krapp laughingly attempts to silence the desires of the past but is increasingly traversed by the desire of the voice, of the Other.

When Krapp is first listening to the tape, still "adjacent to strong white light" (*CDW* 215), he repeats the action that Krapp-at-thirty-nine describes: "I close my eyes and try to imagine them" (*CDW* 218). His attempt to assume the identity of his former self paradoxically both fails and succeeds because the same lack-of-being inhabits both the past Krapp and the present older counterpart. The same failure is clear when old Krapp initially laughs, twice joining in the brief laugh of Krapp- at-thirty-nine, who is being dismissive of his younger self full of "aspirations" and "resolutions." The voice prefigures the later Krapp when it says "Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp" (later echoed by "hard to believe I was ever as bad as that"), but it is also the expression of a repressed desire to once more be that young "whelp" capable of aspiring to be someone and resolve something (*CDW* 218). Desire here regresses to the Imaginary where its course is resisted, being trapped as a subject of repressed desire. At this initial stage, this is the laugh that laughs at another perhaps expressing the laughter of lofty isolation, a manic laughter as in Freud's early hydraulic model: juvenile, or wanting to be juvenile, and perverse. It could be heard to echo the laugh that reverberates in "Live dangerously", a "victorious hiccup in vacuo, as the national anthem of the true ego exiled in habit" (*Proust* 8-9).

The laughter that follows the third time is, significantly, Krapp laughing all "alone" (*CDW* 218). It is old Krapp who now laughs at his old self, recognizing the impossibility of self-reconciliation. His old self laughs heartily at the wish expressed by his younger self to drink less, a laugh that becomes all the more resonant as we hear Krapp the elder's cork-popping in the dark. Old Krapp's laughing "alone" echoes with accentuated emphasis the weaker Freudian laughter that insists that one has to acknowledge oneself comically. It arises out of a palpable sense of inability and

impotence producing a laugh that is dark, sardonic, wicked but lucid. Old Krapp's desire has now been displaced to a dissembled language that is as tattered as his old self, and the lucid recognition that follows this laughing "alone" accompanies old Krapp till the last line of the play. Indeed the laughable aspect of "rusty" old Krapp has changed from beginning to end, spanning, as Rónán McDonald says: "[a] rich and multiple irony, in which the middle-aged man derides his youthful ambitions and then, years later, derides the derider. The sheer disappointment of advancing age has rarely been dramatized with an economy that so satisfyingly combines poignancy and humour" (60).

It is also a humour, as referred to above, which changes from beginning to end. Old Krapp initially manifests all those gestures and movements that give off the whiff of comicality and remind us of Bergson's "something mechanical encrusted on the living." (84).[280] It is the kind of comic that comes complete with stock farcical numbers, such as the pratfalls, the fumbling with objects in and out of pockets and drawers, the sudden pulling out of bananas like rabbits out of hats, the extremely strained actions as a result of utter near-sightedness or deafness and the tossing of objects (banana skin in this case) into the pit, reminding us of the rupture of the fourth wall theatrical convention usually deployed for comic effect. The image here conveyed has clear echoes of the Bergsonian comic where "something mechanical in something living" (110), creates "an effect of automatism and of inelasticity" (72). Krapp's "wearish" self, however, jars with his strikingly comic attire: the too-short trousers, the clownish capacious pockets, the boots that are more than a size too big and the buffoon-like "purple nose" (*CDW* 215). From the start, old Krapp's "disordered grey hair," his being "unshaven" (*CDW* 215) and his laborious walk, give away all that slovenliness-cum-loneliness that sadly characterizes an interest in life that has been stifled.

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[280] In this kind of comic by a certain arrangement of rhythm and rhyme, the words in Beckett's plays produce a lulling of the imagination, a rocking to and fro between like and like with a regular see-saw motion that prepares the reader, as well as the audience, to submissively accept the transformation of a person into a thing taking place before one's very own eyes. What might appear as a thin fabric of banter dazzling us with its quick venue of phrase- *quid pro quo*- can be equated to this same transformation which Bergson calls "the comic created by language" (127), rather than expressed by it.

Indeed, throughout the play, the two core concepts in Bergson's discussion of laughter, rigidity and repetition, slowly but steadily start to change form. As the play progresses, the clumsiness of the buffoon-like creature is of a less automaton-type, increasingly shorn of its funny side, beginning to verge on a palpable human ineptitude soon to stand out against the inhumanity of the machine itself over which, at the end, Krapp throws himself. The winding down of comicality unfolds through the increasingly brisk switching on and off of the tape recorder, the more impatient winding backwards and forwards, the longer and more frequent tense, almost delirious, brooding. In this bewildering display of euphoria and wretchedness, one starts to recognize the farcical reversals and cracked grandeur not of an ordinary clown, but a very tragic one.[281] Indeed increasingly the humour that Krapp visibly manifested at the start of the play becomes almost uncanny.

What is slowly unveiled through these increasingly agitated gestures, which reach their apex with the violent "wrench[ing] off [of] tape" (*CDW* 223), is the sense of lack-of-being, the desire for the Other inhering in the old man. This alienation from his former self is reflected in an alienation from his old language on tape and the frustrated desire for the Other is displaced onto fragmented utterances oddly strung together: "Maybe he was right. [*Broods. Realizes. Switches off. Consults envelope*.] Pah! [*Crumples it and Throws it away. Broods. Switches on*.] Nothing to say. Not a squeak" (*CDW* 222). Krapp's linguistic competence increasingly reveals absence within its structure: a stark, fragmentary language that reflects his enfeebled condition: "What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool" (*CDW* 222). The latter phrase is a far cry from the energetic and smug voice that declared: "Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old

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[281] Ruby Cohn has dealt at length with Beckettian humour. In *Back to Beckett* Cohn, arguing against Hugh Kenner, who had emphasized Beckett's affinity with tragic yet indomitable clowns, declares that "the clown mask is shattered by anguish" (*Back to Beckett* 4). In *Just Play: Beckett's Theatre*, Cohn states that Beckett's humour "has grown grimmer" and that, though his "wide appeal . . . rests uneasily upon his humour," his vision is "tragic . . . in its frustration at absurdity" (11). In *The Comic Gamut* Cohn expounds a tragicomic cosmic irony ("ironic cosmological comedy") as the key to Beckett's major works. Though Cohn acknowledges that Beckett is a master of Chaplinesque clowning, "cosmic irony" (which usually conveys a sense of injustice, victimization and acrid pathos) remains the most important category. For Cohn, Beckett's laughter is non-cathartic since it is "a mask for, not a release from, despair" (*The Comic Gamut* 287). This description resembles Baudelaire's portrait of Melmoth the Wanderer's demonic laughter, an argument that is clearly opposed in this chapter.

weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the . . . (*hesitates*) . . . crest of a wave-or thereabouts" (*CDW* 217). There is none of the arcane vocabulary of his younger self and, as happens with "viduity", a term old Krapp is now obliged to look up, Krapp's desire has been displaced onto a language that revolves endlessly around absence, particularly around the metonymic displacement to the "fare well to love" entry on one of the spools. The latter is an episode whose impact and temptation Krapp is unable to overcome, as he is, however, equally unable to undo his former aspiration to that farewell.

Indeed, the risibility of the "wearish old man," which appears from the beginning as tinged with melancholy in its interweaving of pathos and buffoonery, crystallizes by the end of the play into a language that is a direct manifestation of an infinite cycle of desire and finally a silent acknowledgement of an absolute impotence against it. Following old Krapp's third lonesome laugh, the sardonic but lucid qualities increasingly hijack this humour until by the end it is only old Krapp's mind that along with the tape runs on in silence. The final stage direction informs us that Krapp remains motionless, immobilized by the "strong white light", but his mind seems to be as intensely focussed as the darkness offstage, where the evocation of the Caravaggesque *chiaroscuro* highlights the disturbingly imbued *scuro* of his mind bursting at the seams.[282] Krapp is besieged by relentlessly un-giggling voices, and he is haunted by laughter-less metaphysical dungeons. This final image cannot alienate us, for it is all too recognizably human. Our initial visible amusement has slowly turned into an embarrassed smirk because we are troubled by the mirthlessness we laugh at as we wait with abated breath for Krapp's attempt at articulating a response: "*Pause. Krapp's lips move. No sound*" (223).

The persona of Krapp has passed from an evocation of Bergson's "mechanical arrangement . . . at the back of the series of effects and causes" (116), creating a situation that belongs to the human attempting to be non-human, to an osmotic movement,

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[282] The light-dark opposition has been regarded as emblematic of a fundamental dualism in the play. See Knowlson. *Light and Darkness in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett* and Knowlson, ed. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, vol.III: Krapp's Last Tape*.

whereby that initial puppet-like creature slowly recovers his crude humanity by giving vent to his frustrated desire through his fragmentary language. The latter clearly reflects his inability to reconcile with his former speech and self. This language increasingly works absence within its structure, until, by the end, the intense lucid stare takes over. And, while the first thesis has to be granted to Bergson, its opposite, that is the comicality of the thing-become-human, is the position argued for by Wyndham Lewis (see 4.3) who, in the already-quoted essay "The Meaning of the Wild Body" (1927), proposes:

> The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a thing behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons. It is only when you come to deny that they are 'persons,' or that there is any 'mind' or 'person' there at all, that the world of appearance is accepted as quite natural and not at all ridiculous. (158-59)

Lewis thus stretches the argument about the funny aspect of thing-become-person to arrive at his root of the comic–a person acting like a person: a humour that entails detaching oneself from one's body. Leopardi's outer ageing laugh detached from an inner suffering, as well as the same splitting in the self that Freud construes during the humorous moment, spring to mind. The same cleaving paves the way for the Lacanian split subject, where desire, realized at the level of language, points to the impossibility of attaining a unified perception of the self. It is in this gap within the self that Krapp's humour takes root. It is a humour that starts by laughing at a human being behaving like a thing, and at a voice to which he feels superior. By the end, however, what is humorous is that same disjunction that torments the old self whose infinitely cyclical desire is elusive.

The dark laughable aspect of a person behaving like a person, in Krapp resigning to carry on with his old self, is in the wintry consolation of Krapp pulling himself up short in front of himself. Old Krapp's humour is a celebration of the dianoetic laugh. It is a certain fragile affirmation, which echoes the Leopardian ageing laugh and the desperate smile in the face of the recognition of human insignificance. It is the lack of "desire to

express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues* 103) that compels one to soldier on.

4.5.2 The Humorous Resistance: *Not I*

In *Not I* (1972), Mouth's brief, stifled laugh followed by a "good laugh," which twice reverberates in the play, are construed as dianoetic laughter at the heart of which is the acknowledgment of the infinite movement of desire. Mouth's dianoetic laugh, demoniacally reverberating like a Satanic Oracle, but having none of the Satanic qualities of the laugh of Baudelaire's Melmoth, gives vent to an infinitely cyclical desire that has split the speaking voice into an "I" and a "She", echoing Lacan's "*moi*" and "*je*" (see 1.4.1). Mouth "faintly lit from close-up and below" (*CDW* 376) surrounded by engulfing darkness twice concedes a laugh which, though at first abrupt and quickly-stifled, soon breaks out into a guffaw shot through with a humour that is pitch black. The initial brief laugh at the idea of mercy is immediately followed by the shaking laugh at the mention of God: "brought up as she had been to believe . . . with the other waifs . . . in a merciful . . . [Brief laugh] . . . God . . . [Good Laugh]" (377). This laughter is indicative of a perennial disjunction that characterizes Mouth both within and without. As Linda Ben-Zvi describes the play:

> *Not I* is ur-Beckett, the image that underlies all other Beckett works: a mouth, unable to stop, unable to get 'It' right or 'I' acknowledged, attempting to talk itself–in this case herself–into sense, attempting in the process to find an author of the words and of the self, and failing in both endeavours. (260)

Mouth ponders that: "writhe she could not . . . as if in actual agony" (378), and thus the inability to manifest pain compels the latter to be displaced onto the mode of being "disconnected", "numbed", but "the brain still . . . still sufficiently . . . in control" (378) or better "under control" (378). This idea of disconnection and evasion from the 'self' is announced as the principal theme in the title of *Not I*. The "godforsaken hole" exposes a fractured existence in the very attempt to deny its own pronominal, ontological bond with that existence. Mouth's vehement refusal to say "I," marked by four moments of crisis in which her monologue becomes a dialogue with an inner inaudible voice: "what? . .

.who?. . .no!. . .she!" is an implicit rejection of the first person pronoun that threatens to invade her resolute "she"-narration. And yet, while Mouth refuses to be the subject of the enunciation, thereby rejecting an active role in her life, her mouth boundlessly gives voice to what turn out to be the decisive aspects of her life.

It transpires that at the heart of this laughter, through which Mouth attempts stoic resistance against the ubiquitous misery, is indeed an outpouring beyond control: an infinite attempt not to desire which brings to the fore that very desire. It is an unstoppable outpouring against which the attempt to shore up speech is totally elusive. Mouth's laugh clearly does not lead to a liberating communal laugh *a la* Bakhtin but is more akin to the dark but empowering laugh at the core of Freud's humour, as expressed in his 1927 essay. Mouth's is the mirthless laugh of the revised Freudian version, as is also Krapp's laugh at his old self, a guffaw that faces up to its own unhappiness and failure. It confronts its own contradictions, longing to be free from the constraints of its accompanying discourse, but accepting the impossibility of such freedom. The raising of what has been displaced to the threshold of its perception in language allows Mouth to laughingly face up to the profound unhappiness that has imbued her entire life. This unhappiness raised to consciousness is the source of dianoetic laughter.

Opposing Wolfgang Iser's argument on Beckett's laughter, where he exclusively focuses on Freud's early hydraulic model of humour, I argue that the dianoetic laughter is a cognitive laugh and does have a cathartic effect.[283] Mouth's second convulsive laugh is cognitive in the way it paradoxically acknowledges itself not only as already a decentred subject, perennially split at its heart between "I" and "She," but that breach reminds us of Lacan's reading of the Hegelian slave's futile attempt at eliminating the master.

Mouth, representing the simulacrum of a narrator, while "rest of face [is] in shadow" (*CDW* 376), is enslaved by the incessant spate of words that insistently pours out. The mouth itself, from where the bellowing laugh erupts, is given maximal attention

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[283] In "The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theatre" Iser states: "This laughter [Beckett's] has no cathartic effect, but in its mirthlessness is still a response to the human condition, which is lit up by the laughter and is accepted as itself and not as an interpretation of itself." In *Samuel Beckett*, ed. Kate Ince and Jennifer Birkett, 223.

zooming in on the suspended orifice and thus privileging her status as Mouth- the organ of compulsive enunciation. Mouth's guffaw acknowledges the "I" to "she" in the bondage of speech, apparent in her twofold desire: on the one hand, the longing to erase her words thereby recoiling from her existence, on the other, striving to recognize her speech: "can't stop the stream . . . and the whole brain begging . . . begging the mouth to stop . . . straining to hear . . . piece it together . . . and the brain . . . raving away on its own . . . trying to make sense of it . . . or make it stop" (*CDW* 380). The irony lies in hearing herself say: "it can't go on" in relation to "straining to hear" which renders her whole stream of speech without beginning or end eerily laughable. Mouth's guffaw is an acceptance of the infinite desire expressed in this logorrhoea where the wish to come to an end coincides with the will to carry on.

Indeed it is a logorrhoea, as it has often been described, where "words were. . . words were coming . . . imagine! . . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own" (379). It is a "stream . . . steady stream . . . she who had never . . . practically speechless . . . all her days" (379). She needs to rush to "nearest lavatory . . . start pouring it out . . . mad stuff" (382). It is an overwhelming "mouth on fire" that cannot be put out and it seems to come from the darker Hell of Dante's *Inferno*.[284]

Mouth's laugh, however, is also a laugh of dried-up tears: "just the tears . . . sat and watched them dry . . . all over in a second" (381). Mouth laughingly acknowledges the bitterness in the paradoxical symmetry of cancellation and recognition which reminds us of Lacan's earlier-mentioned expression that not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing. For Mouth's laughs are also a desperate response to her urge to end her discourse as she struggles with the alienating flux of words that only distances her further from the "begging it all to stop" (382). This two-pronged movement again brings to the surface Lacan's already cited statement where he asserts that it is: "not so much because

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[284] Keir Elam draws striking parallels between the suspended orifice of *Not I* and the talking heads of the traitors in Circle IX in *Inferno Canto* XXXII. He locates a particularly striking similarity to Bocca (Italian for 'Mouth'), a Florentine traitor of the Ghibellines at the Battle of Montaperti. In *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*,152-53.

the other holds the keys to the desired object, as because his object(ive) is to be recognized by the other" (*Écrits* 222).

Mouth laughs at the realization that the gap between "I" and "she" will never be healed and, in the light of Lacan's quoted statement, it is also the realization that that same desire realized at the level of words, is perennially misrecognized. Hers is a darkly humorous confrontation of the ambivalent desire to "make something of it" (380), which represents the wish both to demystify but also paradoxically to recognize the opaque nature of her own unconscious−"She" (as an Other). Mouth as a breached subject is a slave to her speech who has to ". . . keep on . . . trying . . . not knowing what . . . what she was trying" (382). In Lacanian terms, Mouth's split subject is after the demand for love, a doomed demand. This demand for love manifested at the level of Mouth's speech is hinted at from the very beginning of the play where we already get an inkling as to why she is both desperate for and in total denial of recognition from the external other:[285]

> Out…into this world…this world…tiny little thing…before its time…in a godfor-…what?. . .girl?. . .yes…tiny little girl…into this…out into this…before her time…godforsaken hole called …called…no matter…parents unknown…unheard of…he having vanished…thin air…no sooner buttoned up his breeches…she similarly… eight months later… almost to the tick…so no love…spared that…no love such as normally vented on the…speechless infant…in the home…no…nor indeed for that matter any of any kind…no love of any kind…at any subsequent stage. (377)

The interminable and alienating nature of desire is thus coming from the perspective of an internal/external Other and it can be seen in Mouth's signifying flow: " . . . so that people would stare . . . once or twice a year . . . stare at her uncomprehending" (379) and ". . . sudden urge to . . . tell . . . then rush out stop the first she saw . . . half the vowels

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[285] In a celebrated article entitled "The Father, Love and Banishment" Julia Kristeva argues that *Not I* represents the Carnivalized wreck of Christian civilization. Beckett's writing, she argues, discloses the characteristic features of the paternal symbolic, the discourse of Western Christian culture. The Father is dead but Western imaginations are fixed by the decayed paternal corpse, and meaning remains situated in the realm of exile and death. Kristeva states: "This act of loving and its incumbent writing spring from the Death of the Father- from the Death of the third person (as *Not I* shows)" (250). In *Samuel Beckett*, ed. Ince and Birkett, 247-58.

wrong . . . no one could follow . . . till she saw the stare she was getting . . . then die of shame . . . crawl back in" (382).

As a torn subject separated from unconscious desire, and sensing her existence in relation to an Other, Mouth's position as a slave of her utterances corresponds to her distance and alienation from the outside world. Her laugh at once expresses the effort to escape from her solitude by dismissing it, while making a statement about her predicament to reach out to the external other only to get people to "stare at her uncomprehending" (379) compelling her sense of inadequacy, wanting to "die of shame" (382).

Mouth's twice repeated guffaw is then not just a way of asserting detachment from the outside world and a quest for self-sufficiency but is also associated with the irreducible gap between the desire for recognition and the recognition of the irreducibility of desire.

Mouth's semantic tirade at the alien external other who is unable to relate to her discourse can also be identified in the Auditor, a silent witness in his recurring "gesture of helpless compassion." The latter implies the communication gap between the impossibility of both recognizing desire and bringing it to a halt, knowledge of which impossibility is locked at the heart of Mouth's guffaw. Ragland-Sullivan once more comes to the aid in elucidating Lacan's argument: "Repetition, therefore, is a normal mode of the subject, unaware that its curious structure makes it live the dialectical unconscious at the level of conscious life" (112).

In *Not I* this conscious life is thus to be found in the signifying chain best exemplified by the insistence, on Mouth's part, to shift to the third person pronoun in her speech. The continuous employment of "she" underscores that the speaker fails to say "I" and that "she" has to resign to the role of a shifting signifier. Indeed Mouth insists on an endless litany of negations (" . . . words were– . . .what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she!") where she is reduced to the linguistic medium *per se*–a status that disintegrates personhood. Mouth's emphasis on the third person pronoun can be related to the cleavage between speech and the subject's entity, the decentred subject or the ex-centricity of the

subject that brings us back to Plessner's discussion on humour quoted by Critchley (see 4.5) and Freud's discussion of the super-ego laughing at the ego as defined in his essay 'Humour' (see 4.3).

The ex-centricity of this humour emphasizing a gap within the self which permits that one laughingly views the 'self' as if from the outside is the very predominant characteristic of Mouth's *risus purus*. Mouth's is the pure laugh that recognizes that it can only identify itself through verbal interaction, a process which is, however, continually distorted and repeated by the always-already-present repressed discourse of the "I" and its desire of the Other. In this context, the Lacanian "*moi*"'s interference at the level of the "*je*" could be grafted onto the "I" whose interference is denied by the place taken by "she." And as in the 1927 version of Freudian humour, characterized by a two-way movement between desire and anti-desire (see 1.2.1; 1.3; 1.4.2; 4.3), in *Not I* there is also this two-pronged move. As in the desire of the Lacanian *Moi* for fusion with the Other, the "I" in *Not I* manifests an underlying death wish which, apparently, remains unfulfilled: ". . . April morning . . .face in the grass . . . nothing but the larks . . . pick it up" (382). The attempt of "I"to harm itself is equivalent to the attempt to emaciate desire and still it forever. In the opposite direction, however, kicks back the "She" to whom the infinite 'rushing out' into language is willingly attributed. As the play draws to an end, this infinite movement at the centre of that earlier still-echoing laugh is predominant: the voice, on the one hand regresses, slowly diminishing in volume, on the other it continues "behind curtain, unintelligible" (383), until darkness ceases.

Beckett's, as well as Leopardi's laugh thus has a more pronounced positive side, *pars construens*, than a negative side, *pars destruens*. The Leopardian and Beckettian dianoetic laugh is ultimately a cognitive laugh in its wise acceptance of the finite. The dianoetic laugh in these two thinkers is an expression of the self's consciousness of itself marked by an awareness of its own limitations in the face of that which is infinite–desire. It is also constructive in its knowledge that that final "incomparable" (almost deafening) silence and the fast encroaching darkness require, in the end, to be bravely faced.

Conclusion

Following an exploration of the various facets of desire, from Leopardi's reflection on the subject until Beckett takes up the issue by quoting the Recanati poet, I establish that the former's reading of the latter is neither one nor the other's last word on the question of desire. I examine the notion of desire that compelled one author to uphold the other, concluding that Beckett's reading of Leopardi is rather reductive (and it is a reductive image of the *artisan de ses malheurs* that is sometimes being mocked). Beckett chooses to focus on the early, somewhat negative, period of Leopardi's writings and it is no wonder that these early phases in both authors have instigated readings that point to pessimism and nihilism in their most acute expression. Beckett's reading apparently disregards how the Italian poet's thoughts on desire radically change at a not-so-later stage and how Leopardi ultimately deems human desire and the illusions that come with it as absolutely necessary.

A twist to the entire argument, however, is that desire indeed remains central not just for Leopardi but for both authors, and both Leopardi and Beckett go beyond the question of the ablation of desire. I attempt to show how both writers come to view and project desire in their later work in an eerily similar manner, an interesting occurrence, given that they had been brought together because of their similar aspiration for stoic ataraxic bliss.

Beckett clearly admired Leopardi as a poet. In "Dante…Bruno.Vico..Joyce" in *Disjecta* (30), Beckett celebrates the writer he considered his master in his early career−James Joyce. Here he quotes from Leopardi's poem "Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze" ("On the monument to Dante being prepared in Florence"). Significantly, he cites Leopardi's phrase (where the latter upholds Dante as the only poet capable of reaching Homer's height): "colui per lo cui verso−il meonio cantor non è più solo" ("the poet thanks to whom / Homer doesn't stand alone"; lines 21-22). The implication is clearly that the poet who penned these lines is capable of equal

greatness as is testified to by calling Leopardi a 'sage' in the context where the desire not to desire is discussed.

Nonetheless, while the desire not to desire was a pivotal issue for Beckett in the early 1930s, as much as for Leopardi, particularly in the period that spanned 1819 to 1828, desire continues to resurface in both authors. This is especially the case in one of Beckett's first plays−*Endgame* (but also plays written at a later stage like *Happy Days*) and in Leopardi's last poem "La Ginestra." The acknowledgment that desire is inextinguishable and that ultimately the desire to desire (even in vain) is absolutely necessary becomes, for Leopardi and Beckett, increasingly thematic. This realization makes the pessimist and nihilist readings of either one, the other, or both writers' oeuvre, look increasingly tenuous.

I have attempted to show that desire in Leopardi's and Beckett's work is both characterized by dearth and an inability to come to terms with expression, a Lacanian desire characterized by a 'coring out' effect, as much as it is a desire for the other person which acts as an inspiration of the infinite, even when the infinite is a threatening, malevolent force. This desire is anything but pleasant and it is clear that contact with the other is intrinsically difficult, if not bruising. The latter desire, however, in spite of its irritating strangeness, can bring about compassion for one's neighbour (albeit a neighbour-as-stranger)− a Levinasian kind of compassion based on the presence of desire and not, as in Schopenhauer, on its emaciation.

Desire in Leopardi and Beckett is also crucial to their similarly construed dark humour, best given expression through their shared dianoetic laugh. The desire at the heart of this laughter is infinite and consumes the human being in his or her futile quest for life's happiness. In both authors, the suffering that characterizes earthly life is central but it can be alleviated through the laugh that imbues with cerebral power, the laugh that knows what it is laughing at and that admits human insignificance–*ride si sapis*. In this sense, Leopardi's and Beckett's oeuvres resort to humour in the full knowledge of what the latter masks: the ineluctable nature of life's suffering.

Beckett's oeuvre, then, does not simply deal with life as a Schopenhauerian *pensum* waiting for the *defunctus*, as the emphasis in *Proust* seems to be (see 2.3). Nor is life simply Leopardian "*souffrance*" where the Epitectian self-restraint is all one should aspire to in order to alleviate the quotidian earthly pain (2.2). Beckett offers an excellent comment upon the ineluctable nature of life's suffering in the conclusion to his short story "Dante and the Lobster," where protagonist Belacqua, after mocking Italian nineteenth-century writers by referring to his "impression, that the nineteenth century in Italy was full of old hens trying to cluck," (*More Pricks than Kicks* 15), ends with his oxymoronic statement about life: "it's a quick death, God help us all. It is *not*" (*More Pricks than Kicks* 19, my emphasis).

Life is *not* a quick death. Towards the end of this story the "Take into the air my quiet breath" (19) eerily echoes, once more, the opening line "or posa per sempre" in "A se stesso." What Beckett is here proposing−stillness, what he had proposed in *Proust*–the complete identification of the subject with the object of one's desire, as well as what Leopardi early on sought in Stoic philosophy, were all revealed to be, by both writers' own admission, impossible to attain. If these latter necessary conditions of happiness are impossible, and life is indeed not a quick death, then some form of happiness has to put up with desire and its partial satisfaction, both being not just unavoidable but necessary. And if desire is susceptible to some gratification, then the "ablation of desire" need not always be recommended. This is also the case with relation to its ethical role.

In *Proust* Beckett speaks about the futility of friendship, describing it as, at best, a "tragic" form and a "failure to possess" (46). The impossibility of love and true friendship is deduced from the inexplicable phenomenon of the continuum of entities where an infinite regress follows when you try to relate the figures on common ground. Proust's lovers, Beckett's "subject and object," are torn by a similar problem: the impossibility of being grasped. The lover's quest is revealed to be a perpetual labour. In Leopardi, desire in friendship proves to be equally elusive. The *Operette morali* end with Plotino, who preaches the necessity of love, countered by Tristano, who preaches truth. No progress has been made from the beginning of the moral tales, specifically the first *operetta morale* entitled "Storia del genere umano," and Plotino and Tristano are the

human personification of the "genii" sent to earth by Zeus. However, Tristano's brave refusal of any deceptive consolation and Plotino's "senso dell'animo" serve to continue to desire and suffer for mankind. Indeed this union gives life to "La Ginestra."

In my reading of "La Ginestra" within a tradition of criticism that finds in this poem a crucial ethical message, the human being faces the smallness and precariousness of his existence and desires a harmonious creation with the other in order to attempt to overcome the lawless chaos. The poetic voice perceives the surrounding destructiveness of nature but instead of withdrawing it reaches out to the other through the "conversar cittadino." This is also my reading of Beckett's plays *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. In Leopardi's poem and Beckett's chosen plays, I read an appeal to humankind to endure together a life which offers neither hope nor comfort as a way of accepting the difficult desire of the other, transfiguring this appeal to desire into poetic creation.

The desire intrinsic to human beings has to be accepted as a form of illusion, of aiding the human being to endure, whether through the ability of being compassionate towards the other or the ability to find humour. Desire among human beings can never be neatly and harmoniously pigeon-holed or possessed. Friendship and ethicality in general cannot be conceived to be about 'totalizing.' I believe, and here I bring back Levinas, that desire for the other, rather than 'totalizing' the differences, is about 'infinitizing,' or rather making room for the infinite differences of the other, be s/he friend or foe. Desire for this other is indeed infinite and infinitely cyclical, but rather than throwing the gauntlet on the impossibility of totalizing desire, one can acknowledge one's impotence in its presence and derive strength out of it. The poetic voices and *dramatis personae* in the chosen works of Leopardi and Beckett, I attempt to prove in this study, succeed in doing just that.

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