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Roberta Cauchi-Santoro

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

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PREFACE

In this monograph, I question critical approaches that argue for Giacomo Leopardi's and Samuel Beckett's pessimism and nihilism. Such approaches, whether the focus has been on one writer or the other or both, stem from Beckett's quotation of Leopardi in his monograph *Proust*, during a discussion of the removal of desire. And yet the role of desire in both writers' work, I argue, actually exposes the inappropriateness of the pessimist and nihilist labels. 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' attempts to reach the respective existential cores of Beckettian "suffering of being" and Leopardian "*souffrance*" might seem to point towards the presumed nothingness of their existential quest, closer examination reveals that their shared aim to still desire is outdone by a persistent and combative desire that pervades their later work. Looking at Leopardi's later poetry in the *ciclo di Aspasia*, including one of the last poems, "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's theories, a desire that 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).

This monograph began as a PhD dissertation. I am thus immensely grateful to my dissertation supervisors, Prof. Jonathan Stuart Boulter and Prof. Luca Pocci for their judicious guidance throughout. In addition, I would like to thank my wonderful family and friends. A heartfelt thank-you goes to my husband Domenico for his unflagging support, my parents, Frieda and Carmelo Cauchi, my sister Claudia and my brother Christopher. Above all, I would like to thank my daughter Federica, who teaches me the sheer joy of pursuing interests and discovering something new every day.

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INTRODUCTION

> In noi di cari inganni | non che la speme, il desiderio è spento[1]

When Samuel Beckett meditated on desire in works such as *Proust*, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and *Molloy*, he returned often to the lines quoted above from Giacomo Leopardi's poem "A se stesso." Just before quoting this poem in *Proust*, Beckett catalogues Leopardi as one of the sages who proposed the only (im)possible solution to living: the removal of desire. The question of the "ablation of desire" (*Proust* 18), upon which Beckett reflects, is the same one that puzzled Leopardi, and later Arthur Schopenhauer (whose philosophy bridges Leopardian and Beckettian thought), when they pondered humans' insistence on allowing desire to consume their lives.

The centrality of the "ablation of desire" for Leopardi and Beckett, where the desired experience itself is imagined as the homeland of delusion, has spurred pessimist and nihilist readings. I argue that the pessimist and nihilist labels attributed to Leopardi and Beckett are inadequate because of the role desire plays in the two thinkers' work, especially in relation to another central theme in both of their oeuvres: compassion. Although the sage who aspires to a desire-free life is central for both writers, the sage-ideal Beckett proposes through Leopardi – particularly in *Proust*, that monograph so inspired by Schopenhauer – is a failed sage.[2] Leopardi's and Beckett's later work emphatically corrects the ideal of stoic ataraxic bliss they upheld in their early work. Hence, my contention is that, despite being brought together in their similar aspiration for a desire-free existence, it is specifically desire that remains central for Leopardi and Beckett, particularly as it intertwines with compassion. The centrality of a surprisingly similar notion of human compassion for both Leopardi and Beckett defies pessimist and nihilist readings of both authors.

The sage-ideal Beckett refered to in *Proust* by citing Leopardi is also ultimately not upheld in relation to the aesthetically productive desire-free moment. Schopenhauer proposes that to be snatched away from desire can

[1] "Not only our hope | but our desire for dear illusions is gone" (*Proust* 18).

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

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transport the individual into a state of pure cognition, where aesthetic appreciation is possible. The individual in a desire-less moment becomes "the one eye of the world that gazes out from all cognizing creatures" (*World as Will and Representation* 1: 221). Leopardi's ultra-sensitive individual at the mercy of "*souffrance*," who aspires to *atarassia* [ataraxia], and whose quiet suffering enables artistic production, foreshadows Schopenhauer's aspiration for stoic ataraxy. The stoic's ataraxic aspiration also clearly prefigures and intersects productively with the Beckettian "suffering of being" (*Proust* 19). This ataraxic aspiration attempts to interrupt longing, and is both a source of pain or suffering and an apt condition for aesthetic appreciation. However, the human being can never perfectly inhabit a realm free of desire and will. 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 such a difficult state of pure contemplation is impossible to achieve, what remains is "the emptiness of the idle will, the misery of boredom" (1: 228).[3]

In contrast to the dissolution of desire in *ataraxia*, the desire for the other is central in Leopardi's and Beckett's oeuvres. That is, while the two writers' attempts to reach their 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 the philosophical kernel of both authors' oeuvres, 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 di Aspasia* (which include the quoted "A se stesso"), as well as one of his last poems "La ginestra o il fiore del deserto," and examining Beckett's plays *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, I argue that desire in Leopardi and Beckett should be read as lying at the cusp between Jacques Lacan's and Emmanuel Levinas's theories of desire. Leopardi's and Beckett's desire encompasses the struggle between the forces of *thanatos* and *eros*; their desire is one of self-preservation as well as a desire that acquires meaning in social interaction. These forces are also central to the death – as opposed to sexual – drive at the core of Freud's pleasure and reality principles and Lacan's breached subject in "*moi*" and "*je*." To counter desire as a tension

[3] 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.

between *thanatos* and *eros*, which splits the subject (and is thus based on lack), I propose that Leopardi and Beckett are inspired by a Levinasian kind of desire that moulds the subject when called to address the other – inspiring Levinas's particular concept of "infinity," which is opposed to "totality" and can be pitted against the nothingness crucial to pessimist and nihilist readings.

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 chapters 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.

Mediated by the Schopenhauerian notion of compassion, the compassionate trait in Leopardi and Beckett can be read in the two authors' portrayal of desire for the other. This desire can be construed as both Lacanian and, very significantly, Levinasian. 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 is rooted in Leopardi, where compassion entails being able to feel other individuals' suffering. It is a notion, however, that differs from, for instance, Levinas's, because while in Schopenhauer the compassionate human being is able to still desire, in Levinas compassion undergoes an inverse movement. I argue for a desire in Leopardi and Beckett that, in spite of any attempt to still its source, paradoxically brings about more of a Levinasian compassion. In "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* the self becomes a compassionate subject who is, as Levinas says, "unable to shirk: this is the 'I'" (*Totality and Infinity* 245). The desiring subject thus plays a pivotal role in the desire for the O/other, a Lacanian desire characterized by a 'coring out' effect. Nonetheless, the desiring subject in Leopardi and Beckett can also be interpreted as characterized by a Levinasian desire in its being-for-the-other. The desire of the subject encompasses Freudian death and life drives, Lacanian demand versus desire, 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 study unfolds in three chapters. In chapter one, I briefly trace the theme of desire in the specific designated framework. I delve at some length into the contributions of Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Freud, Lacan, and Levinas, all of whom shape Beckettian desire as the outcome of the human subject's division. The trajectory of my discussion passes through Leopardi's

desire of *amor proprio* (building on eighteenth-century Enlightenment conceptions of *amour propre*) and develops into Schopenhauerian Will as opposed to its negation. It passes through Freud's death as opposed to life drive and Lacan's cleaved subject into "*moi*" and "*je*," where the "*moi*" is specifically equated by Lacan to *amour propre*. The first chapter is thus a meditation on the nature of desire, in particular the desire both Leopardi and Beckett bring out. It sets up the theoretical scaffolding for the analysis of desire through Leopardi's poetic voices and the utterances of Beckett's dramatic characters. The voices' and characters' attempt and failure to come to terms with the elusive nature of their speech can be equated to the impossibility of reunifying Lacan's split subject. Consequently the voices and characters displace desire onto the violence of a language that cuts up what it addresses and represents an act that is repeated in the speech spewed out by Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* and Winnie in *Happy Days*.[4] I also examine this speech in "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* through the "Saying," the being-for-the-Other, conceived according to the philosophical analysis of Levinas.

In chapter two, I briefly review the criticism that constructs Leopardi and Beckett as pessimists, nihilists, and existentialists. I explore the negation of desire, crucial to Leopardian *atarassia* tinged by "*souffrance*" and Beckettian "suffering of being," arguing that both writers' work stems (but also significantly differs) from pessimism, nihilism, and existentialism. Indeed, "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being," and the desire to cease desiring which is at their very crux, have been repeatedly perceived through a philosophically pessimist lens. Bevir lists three types of pessimism within which Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and Beckett could all be placed: the existential, cultural, and metaphysical pessimist traditions. In the case of Leopardi and Beckett, their work ultimately concedes the imperishable quality of human desire.

In chapter three, I flesh out the discussion revolving around irreducible desire by arguing for a desire that is suspended between Lacanian and Levinasian notions of the concept. I suggest that desire as presented in Leopardi's and Beckett's oeuvres goes beyond anything that could possibly offer fulfilment. Desire is a surplus always exterior to Levinas's "totality" because it affirms the otherness, integrity, and transcendence of the Other. This form of desire goes beyond the Beckettian "suffering of being" or Leopardian *atarassia* (tinged by "*souffrance*") because it breaks free of the disintegrating effect of the desire-free epiphanic moment and instead engages and even serves the other. It compels one to first freely make a choice for the traumatizing face-to-face encounter: the choice to

[4] 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.

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. Nonetheless, they take account of the strange world inhabited by the other person who, on being addressed, becomes Other.

Notwithstanding its elusive quality, language can thus serve as a vehicle through which desire is channelled. The desire expressed through language is insatiable, endlessly reproductive, asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, and non-dialogic, all the while yearning for that which transcends the 'I.' In Levinas's view, 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 Levinasian desire, which interprets the production of being as goodness.

Following Levinas, I argue that the ethical relation with the Other has to be considered 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 locate the foundational power of the 'ethical encounter' in "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* in the forging of community with another 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's Other saddles the 'I' with unfamiliarity and even alienation but also, relatedly, binds it with commitment. In Levinas the pre-Other self is thus an 'I' who answers the call which, unlike in Lacan, leads less to alienation than to inspiration.

In both Leopardi and Beckett, Lacanian torn subjects are counterintuitively confronted by the Levinasian good-of-the-other. The concern with the other in both authors makes the balance tip towards a Levinasian desire that can potentially enable unique compassion: "[i]n 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" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 124). Desire in Leopardi and Beckett is thus equated with putting oneself in the place of another. Despite their similar aspiration for stoic ataraxic bliss, it changes the game to unravel how both Leopardi and Beckett go beyond the question of the "ablation of desire" and come to view and project desire as central to human compassion.

CHAPTER ONE

ON DESIRE

1.1 What Desire?

Leopardi's treatment of desire in "A se stesso," the poem that Beckett quotes in *Proust* and other works, affirms the fundamental common ground between Leopardi's and Beckett's respective existential enquiries. The removal of desire in Leopardi, explicitly announced in "A se stesso," has its roots 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; 19-22 April 1826)[1]

Beckett also cites "A se stesso" in the opening line of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* where he jeeringly places Leopardi in a list of mostly fictitious writers of "gloomy composition":

> [Belacqua] 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)

[1] "Go into a garden of plants, grass, flowers. No matter how lovely it seems. Even in the mildest season of the year. You will not be able to look anywhere and not find suffering. That whole family of vegetation is in a state of *souffrance*, each in its own way to some degree" (*Zibaldone* 1823). All translations from the *Zibaldone* are taken from Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (eds.) *Zibaldone*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013.The garden is here projected as also cultivated and governed by the human being's intervention, an eighteenth-century topos that finds in G.-L. Leclerc Buffon one of its foremost theoreticians. The garden portrayed here, however, is not the *paradisus voluptatis* of Biblical descent but is an anti-Eden, a sick garden that looks more like a cemetery.

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The ebbing of desire is instigated by suffering. This ebbing takes place when desire flees into the inner core of existential agony; here, 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 "[l]a 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" (*Operette morali* 176-7).[2] 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" (*Operette morali* 178).[3] Schopenhauer corroborates this thought when he says, "our mental activity is a continuously delayed boredom," because "life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom" (1: 338). Suffering is the state in which the human being is most alive.

Suffering replacing boredom is also paramount in the second and third quotations from Leopardi that Beckett uses in *Proust*. Beckett inserts the second quotation to demonstrate that choice is indicative of will. He argues that the wise aspire to the obliteration of both the will and desire:

> 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; this idea further justifies Beckett's third quotation of Leopardi: "e fango è il mondo."[4] This verse is quoted again in *Molloy*, where the truncated quotation from Leopardi is found in an explicitly obscene context which highlights the ubiquity of human suffering exposed by tearing through boredom:

> 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,

[2] "[l]ife is made up of and interwoven partly with suffering and partly with boredom; and it cannot escape from one of these passions except by falling into the other" (177).

[3] "The last one is the most powerful of all, for as he suffers, man can in no way feel bored" (179).

[4] This quotation initially served as an epigraph in *Proust*. 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") is taken from the same poem "A se stesso" (lines 9-10).

> 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)

Molloy's will to be amputated further amputates the Leopardian quotation on desire found in *Proust*. The implication is that the sage-ideal Beckett proposes through Leopardi should ultimately be debunked.

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 writers' 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. By pitting the Lacanian against the Levinasian approach, I highlight aspects that can be read in both Leopardi and Beckett.

It is important, at the outset, to define key idiosyncratic references that can smooth the way for the argument. The distinction between the desire of the "Other" as opposed to the "other," for instance, is pivotal. 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 belongs to what Lacan calls the Imaginary order (see 1.4). The Lacanian big Other (with an upper-case 'O'), 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 belongs to what Lacan calls the Symbolic order. Lacan states, "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject" (*Écrits* 7).[5] Thus, I refer, as does Lacan, to the Other as an object of unconscious desire. Nonetheless, the "other" as another subject is equally barred from unconscious desire (as an Other).[6] The Other can thus be construed

[5] 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).

[6] 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, conversely, is formed in the subject's subjection to the order of sexual difference and thus to language. As will be explained in 1.4, for Lacan it is precisely language that produces sexual identity in the subject. I 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 who 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

as both the Lacanian Other who is forever painfully longed for but remains elusive and perennially splits the subject, as well 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. The two terms are the linchpin of both thinkers' respective revolutionary projects.

Despite the fact that Levinas and Lacan both developed influential theories of the Other, for years, they 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).[7] I bring Lacan and Levinas together without attempting to efface their differences in any way. I celebrate their opposition in the spirit of true dialogue. Though it will seem that the positions of Lacan and Levinas cannot both be true, it is precisely their coexistence in the Leopardian and Beckettian texts that I will locate in my discussion of 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 alleviate the symptoms caused by psychic conflict. By contrast, Levinas retrieves from the immemorial past that something which structures one as subject for-the-other, even though this occurs without specific prescriptions of content. In both cases, before being the Cartesian ego the 'I' is a subject.[8] While Lacanian theory

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).

[7] 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 note in chapter three, Levinas inched closer to, but did not meet, Lacan.

[8] "Self" is a term that Lacan avoids at every turn since he considers it wrapped in humanist meaning. In the 1950s 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.

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.[9] I argue for an understanding of the Leopardian and Beckettian subject as one who is both traversed by an inextinguishable desire and desiring-the-good-of-the-other. I frame the latter within a theory of ethical subjectivity.[10]

Desire in this study is thus both based on and concomitantly contrasted with the classics, Plato and Aristotle in particular.[11] The thought of Levi-

[9] 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 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).

[10] 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 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).

[11] 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.

nas, 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 Levinas's conception of desire as 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*. In these works Plato presents the desirable as a reflection of the soul desiring another.

1.2 Desire as Lack

The *Symposium* highlights what would become one of the guiding threads in Leopardi's and Beckett's respective conceptions of desire: the dearth through which one recognizes the potential completion of one's own need.[12] Desire as lack is present in its 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 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 and anti-desire (see the introduction above), 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 and Freud. 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). Antonio Prete goes a step further than most Leopardian critics and reads Leopardian desire as a manifestation of the *eros-thanatos* dilemma of the

[12] 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. This is the desire that tries to reunite and restore the being 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). The desire for the permanent possession of the good beyond being 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 rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled" (*Republic* 606 D 1-7). Lacan also mentions Aristophanes's theory of halves (*Écrits* 717).

Freudian death drive (17). In this context, he reads Leopardi as a precursor of Freud (and, by implication, Lacan).[13]

1.2.1 Leopardian Desire: "l'isperanza di esser quieto"[14]

Desire is the initial and final concern of Leopardi's philosophical speculation.[15] Desire for pleasure (and thus the search for happiness) interwoven with the desire to know is "una pena, e una specie di travaglio abituale

[13] Alberto Folin supports Prete's interpretation with some reservation: "[n]on 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).

[14] "Quieto" is counterpoised to "inquieto," or restless. Desire and the urge to suspend it oscillate between the states of being "quieto" and "inquieto" (*Zibaldone* 4259-60; 24 March 1827).

[15] Leopardi follows Baruch Spinoza and Etienne Bonnot de Condillac in conceiving desire as the primary passion, indeed an originary pulsation of the human being, from both a logico-psychological and an ontological order. The theory of desire as an originary pulsation (a tendency that is "ingenita o congenita," an inclination, *Zibaldone* 165-77; 12-23 July 1820) is expounded in the *operetta morale* "Storia del genere umano" and in the famous excerpt about the garden of unhappiness to be found in *Zibaldone* 19-22 April 1826 [cited above]. This *operetta* marks the shift from the primacy of desire to that of uneasiness or restlessness, a theory well known in eighteenth-century Italy through A. Genovesi, but clearly most famously expounded by John Locke. Genovesi will be opposed by P. Galluppi for whom the principal drive is not pain and restlessness but pain and pleasure – desire. Following Condillac, Leopardi proposes a theory of the unified human faculties, starting off with desire, which is the primary and originary disposition. Imagination, which develops from the activity of the senses, and which is the faculty through which ideas are associated and combined, stems from desire but is not originary as desire. Leopardi develops his theory of desire with reference to the original situation of the human being and particularly the situation of the child. For preliminary indications on Leopardi's theory of desire consult A. Folin, "Il Pensiero e il desiderio. Note sulla 'teoria del piacere' di Leopardi," in G. Polizzi (ed.), *Leopardi e la filosofia*. Florence: Polistampa, 2001. 17-34. For the relation between desire and imagination see U. Musarra Schroder, "Leopardi e il piacere dell'immaginazione" in Placella (ed.), *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*. Florence: Polistampa, 2001. 549-66. It is important to point out that Leopardi does not simply speak about the pleasure evoked by the imagination (following an eighteenth-century topos) but also the imagination of pleasure highlighting how passions, and desire in the first place, compel us to imagine pleasure.

per l'anima" (*Zibaldone* 172,1; 12-23 July 1820),[16] and only those who have perpetually suffered can recognize its essence.[17] The complex grid of reflections on the nexus linking finitude, the exigence of the infinite, the role of the imagination, the theme of limitations and the paradoxical connube which serves as liaison between the desire of pleasure and pain informs all of Leopardi's philosophically interwoven strands.[18]

[16] "[A] torment, a kind of habitual anguish of the soul" (*Zibaldone* 133). All translations from the *Zibaldone* are taken from Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (eds.) *Zibaldone*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013.

[17] Leopardi's philosophical speculation started from the initially strictly physical sensation of suffering (*Zibaldone* 162).

[18] See Antonio Prete. *Finitudine e Infinito. Su Leopardi*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998. 103-09. Desire in Leopardi is material, limitless, and indeterminate. Desire is material because it is an immediate or spontaneous result of "amor di sé e della propria conservazione" (*Zibaldone* 181-82, 12-13 July, 1820) ["a spontaneous consequence of our self-love and self-preservation," *Zibaldone* 138]. Every living being is engrossed in self-love and as such is absorbed in the desire of pleasure, "ossia la felicità, che considerandola bene, è tutt'uno col piacere" (*Zibaldone* 165) ["pleasure or happiness, which if you think about it carefully, is the same thing," *Zibaldone* 129]. Desire is limitless both from the point of view of duration as well as extension: "Il detto desiderio del piacere," says Leopardi, "non ha limiti per durata perché […] non finisce se non con l'esistenza, e quindi l'uomo non esisterebbe se non provasse questo desiderio. Non ha limiti per estensioni e perch' è sostanziale in noi, non come desiderio di uno o più piaceri, ma come desiderio *del* piacere" (*Zibaldone* 165) ["The desire for pleasure has no limits of duration, because, as I have said, it ends only with existence, and so human beings would not exist if they did not feel this desire. It has no limits of extent because it belongs to the substance of ourselves, not as the desire for one or more pleasures but as the desire *for* pleasure," *Zibaldone* 129]. Because of this limitlessness, desire in Leopardi has been recently read by Alessandra Aloisi as characterized not by lack (as in the long tradition of desire as conceived from Plato onwards) but by its plentifulness and positivity (245). Aloisi, however, also points out that the border which separates vitality from nihilism in the conception of Leopardian desire is extremely subtle. Furthermore, because of the total conflation of desire with life, Aloisi further underlines the profound Spinozism of Leopardian desire. Aloisi says, "Il desiderio leopardiano ci sembra infatti coincidere quasi perfettamente con quella che Spinoza chiama *cupiditas,* la quale non è altro che il *conatus* o la pulsione con cui l'uomo, come ogni altra cosa esistente, è spinto a perseverare nel suo essere per un tempo indefinito . . . 'Pulsione' è precisamente la parola con cui Filippo Mignini traduce in Spinoza, *Opere*, Milan: Mondadori, 2007, il latino *conatus*. Ci sembra invece fuorviante tradurre con il nostro 'desiderio' quello che Spinoza chiama *desiderium*, definendolo come la tristezza prodotta dall'appetito di possedere una cosa ormai passata, appetito alimentato dunque dal ricordo della cosa e accompagnato dalla consapevolezza di ciò che ne esclude l'esistenza [*Etica*, III, prop. XXXVI con relativo scolio, e def. XXXII della stessa parte]: così inteso il *desiderium* sembra corrispondere piuttosto a quello che noi oggi chiameremmo 'nostalgia'" (245-46) ["As a matter of fact, Leopardian desire seems to coincide almost perfectly with what Spinoza calls *cupiditas*, which is none other than the *conatus* or the drive that in the human being, like in any other living creature, makes him persevere in his being for an indefinite period of time… 'Drive' is precisely the word chosen by Filippo Mignini in his translation of the Latin *co-*

Desire is crucial to Leopardi's "*teoria del piacere*" (theory of pleasure), which, as Folin points out, owes a great deal to the idea of pleasure as a distraction from pain that was in wide circulation among Enlightenment thinkers (97).[19] Folin affirms that the definition of pleasure as the cessation of pain is largely expounded by the *Idéologues* starting with Maupertius (96).[20] Derla draws an important distinction between the Italian thinkers of the eighteenth century, for 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).[21] Derla also highlights how Enlightenment thinkers

natus in Spinoza, *Opere*, Milan: Mondadori, 2007. Nonetheless, it seems to be misleading to translate what Spinoza calls *desiderium* with the Italian word 'desiderio,' defining it as the sadness that results from the crave to possess something that has already passed, thus an appetite that stems from the memory of the thing desired and accompanied by a sense of exclusion from existence (*Etica*, III, prop. XXXVI including relative scholia, and def. XXXII of the same part): *desiderium* intended in this manner rather seems to correspond to that which today we call 'nostalgia,'" my translation].

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

[20] The nature of pleasure, the object of desire and self-love, had certainly become of major importance in the philosophical thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The main Italian theoreticians of sensism 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 lessons 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" (*Zibaldone* 165; "The human soul […] always essentially desires, and focuses solely […] on pleasure, or happiness, which, if you think about it carefully, is the same thing," *Zibaldone* 165).

[21] 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 imply a direct involvement in social problems.

already thought of pleasure as a distraction from the agonizing human condition at the mercy of an insatiable desire. In "Leopardi e la teoria del piacere nel 700" Sorrentino follows the same line of argumentation. He pits the eighteenth-century pursuit of public happiness against Leopardi's drive for unattainable absolute pleasure.[22] Bini points out that eighteenth-century sensists and materialists like J.-O. La Mettrie, Denis Diderot, and P.-J.-G. Cabanis have long been recognized by critics to have influenced Leopardi. She claims that Leopardi's materialism à la Mettrie, however, developed into something closer to the Marquis de Sade's pessimistic conception of destructive nature (87-88).

In his formulation of the theory of pleasure, Leopardi followed not just sensism and materialism, but another central creed of eighteenth-century empiricism, building his argument directly on John Locke's theories as professed by the *Idéologues* (*Zibaldone* 832; 21 March 1821). 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). The eternal anguish desire causes 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" (*Operette morali* 480-81).[23] The human being feels desire most acutely during childhood and in courtship, both periods in one's life when, according to Leopardi, the expression of desire is tied to its future fruition.[24] Desire for pleasure is inextricably linked to desire for knowledge and the second is not possible without the first. Leopardi concludes:

> 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; 12-23 July 1820)[25]

[22] Sorrentino interestingly compares Leopardi's concept of desire with Hegelian dialectics of desire, which dialectics were inspirational to Lacanian desire.

[23] "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* 481).

[24] 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 be in the present (102). This intricacy hints at the connection, in Leopardi as in subsequent theoreticians of desire (including Beckett in *Proust*), between desire and memory.

[25] "After having experienced one pleasure, the soul does not stop desiring pleasure itself, just as it does not stop thinking, because thought and the desire for pleasure are two equally continuous operations that are inseparable from our existence" (*Zibaldone* 139). The desire to know, however, is not infinite but finite. It is the desire to conceive thought that is limitless because it resorts to the faculty

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* and *desiderio*, are interlaced concepts in Leopardi (see 2.1), as is also clear in the Leopardian quotation Beckett repeatedly cites: "non che la speme il desiderio è spento" ("not just the hope but the desire / for loved illusions is done for us," v.5). Although for Leopardi the nexus between desire and hope is an important one, and the Italian poet ultimately admits the irreducibility of both concepts, for Beckett this interweaving is not as smooth. While I argue that Beckett recognizes the inextinguishable quality of desire, the same argument does not apply to hope, which is mostly debunked.[26] 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.

of the imagination (see end of this section). Desire to conceive is inextricably tied to the desire for happiness and pleasure. Leopardi argues: "Non è vero ch'egli sia infinito per sé, ma solo materialmente, e come desiderio del piacere, ch'è tutt'uno coll'amor proprio. E non è vero che l'uomo natural sia tormentato da un desiderio infinito precisamente di conoscere. Neanche l'uomo corrotto e moderno si trova in questo caso. Egli è tormentato da un desiderio infinito del piacere. Il piacere non consiste se non che nelle sensazioni, perché quando non si sente, non si prova né piacere né dispiacere. Le sensazioni non le prova il corpo, ma l'anima, qualunque cosa s'intenda per anima. La sensazione dell'intelligenza, è il concepire […]. L'uomo non desidera di conoscere, ma di sentire infinitamente" (*Zibaldone* 384-85; 7th December 1820). ["It is not true that it is infinite in itself but only materially, like the desire for pleasure, which is all one with self-love. And it is not true that natural man is tormented by an infinite desire precisely for knowledge. This is not even the case for corrupt, modern man. He is tormented by an infinite desire for pleasure. Pleasure consists of nothing other than sensations, because when someone feels nothing, he experiences neither pleasure nor displeasure. It's not the body that experiences these sensations but the soul, whatever is meant by the soul. For the intelligence, sensation is an act of conception […]. Man does not desire to know infinitely, but to feel infinitely," *Zibaldone* 229-30].

[26] Beckett discusses hope in the "Clare Street Notebook," particularly in an entry dated 11 August 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, however, that Beckett's later works, 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" (*Zibaldone* 285, 1; 18 Oct. 1820).[27] *Speranza* and *desiderio* thus become interlaced with the *indefinito*: "Dalla mia teoria del piacere seguita che l'uomo, desiderando sempre un piacere infinito e che lo soddisfi intieramente, desideri sempre e speri una cosa ch'egli non può concepire" (*Zibaldone* 1017, 1).[28] Desire for Leopardi, as Folin insists, is "[o]ntologicamente vano in quanto esso non è mai realizzabile" (102).[29] The reference to *Speranza* in the excerpts posthumously collected in one of the six volumes of the 1998 edition of the *Zibaldone* (titled *Trattato delle passioni*) is linked to the desire for happiness (see 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*" (*Zibaldone* 1547, 1; 22 Aug. 1821).[30] Hope and desire are both characterized by the indeterminacy that imbues the individual's imaginings of past and future happenings, as well as the anticipation of pleasure, including the "piacere della disperazione."[31] 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).

Leopardi thus underscores both the promise of pleasure and the consuming effect of this promise. Indeed, apart from the centrality of the *teoria del piacere*, the focus in any discussion of desire in Leopardi should

[27] "Hope, if only a spark, a drop, does not desert us, even after we have suffered the misfortune most diametrically opposed to that hope, and the most decisive" (*Zibaldone* 187).

[28] "From my theory of pleasure it follows that man, always desiring a pleasure that is infinite and that wholly satisfies him, always desires and hopes for something which he cannot conceive" (*Zibaldone* 482).

[29] "[d]esire is ontologically impossible because it can never be satisfied" (my translation).

[30] "So far is it from the truth that hope or desire will ever abandon a creature which only exists to love itself, and to obtain its own good, and *only to the extent that it loves itself*" (*Zibaldone* 719).

[31] By 18 October 1825, Leopardi will question the existence of despair: "Disperazione, rigorosamente parlando, non si dà." ["Desperation, strictly speaking, does not exist" (*Zibaldone* 1794)]. Despair is interwoven with thought, desire and hope, all of which become 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" (*Zibaldone* 4145). ["It is perhaps little or not at all or not often enough observed that hope is a passion, a way of being, so inherent and inseparable from the feeling of life, that is from life itself, like thought, and like the love of oneslf, and the desire for one's own good. I live therefore I hope" (*Zibaldone* 1793-94)].

also be on the human being as a desiring subject, and thus the crucial role played by *amor proprio* [self-love] should be taken into account.[32] The pivot of desire hinges primarily on *amor proprio* and *amor di sé* [love of oneself] at the roots of all feeling.[33] *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 the human being's efforts: "L'uomo (per l'amore della vita) ama naturalmente e desidera e abbisogna di sentire, o gradevolmente, o comunque, purché sia vivamente" (*Zibaldone* 891). 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" (*Zibaldone* 2496; 24 June 1822).[34] Thus ends can never be fulfilled and suffering is ever-present.

Self-love degenerates into selfishness when the individual enters into contact with others. When *amor proprio* is taken to an extreme, it reflects the egoistic outlook of the "secolo superbo e sciocco" (see 3.2), where egoism crystallizes sentiment into the *mauvaise honte* which originates in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought. Lacan mentions *amor proprio* when he refers to eighteenth-century discussions of self-love, primarily through La

[32] On the human subject as a post-Cartesian desiring subject see E. Pulcini, "La passione del moderno: l'amore di sé: Dall'io generoso al soggetto desiderante" in S. Vegetti Finzi (ed). *Storia delle passioni*. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2000. 137-47.

[33] Jean-Jacques Rousseau's distinction between *amour propre* and *amour de soi* influences Leopardi. It is pertinent to point out that Rousseau's distinction contrasts the concept of self-love as self-preservation to self-love 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 a volume edited by Fabiana Cacciapuoti and Antonio Prete and titled *Trattato delle passioni*. This volume contains indices 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" (2155; 23 Nov. 1821). ["The mass of self-love […] is *infinite absolutely, and of itself*," *Zibaldone* 932]. 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" (*Zibaldone* 3835, 1; 5 Nov. 1823) ["for alongside the intensity of life that of self-love also increases, and self-love is the desire for one's own happiness, and happiness is pleasure" (*Zibaldone* 1582)].

[34] "For desire is only for pleasure, and love of happiness is nothing other than the desire for pleasure, and love of happiness is nothing other than self-love" (*Zibaldone* 1052). Leopardi might have wanted to demonstrate the immanent and material origin of desire within the human being but in his philosophical interrogation he departs from the stimulus-response in which sensist interrogation is locked and introduces the capital distinction between desire of a pleasure and desire of pleasure. This distiction paves the way for Freudian drives (see Folin 104). This desire of pleasure, as in Freud and Lacan, differs from need. See Prete 17-18.

Rochefoucauld's idea of the resistance of *amour propre*, on which desire is based. *Amour propre* in Lacan is located 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" (*Écrits* 87). As Prete argues, Leopardi's desire for self-preservation (which is steeped in eighteenth-century conceptions of 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 *Civilization 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 the 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 uncivilized tribes (*Zibaldone* 3107,1; 5-11 August 1823). On another occasion, however, Leopardi will claim that *amor proprio* is directly proportional to fear:

> [i]l timore, passione immediatamente figlia dell'amor proprio e della propria conservazione, e quindi inseparabile dall'uomo, ma soprattutto manifesta e propria nell'uomo primitivo, nel fanciullo, in coloro che più conservano dello stato naturale (*Zibaldone* 2206, 1; 1 Dec. 1821).[35]

According to Leopardi fear is the most egoistic passion possible; the human being of deep feeling is more likely to become indifferent rather than afraid because, since he or she is more susceptible to suffering, the means of habituation are greater in this being (*Zibaldone* 2208-09; 1 Dec. 1821).

Hence, the desire of *amor proprio* implies an awareness of 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, as well as the pristine qualities that are proximate to Rousseau's noble savage. Civilization and its knowledge have rendered that intrinsic relation with *physis* opaque, disrupting 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 for human presumption, a recurrent theme in the *Operette morali*, particularly in "Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo," where the *folletto* tells the *gnomo*: "[i]o 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" (90-91).[36]

[35] "Fear, the passion that is the immediate daughter of self-love and its very preservation, and hence inseparable from man, but that is above all manifested in and characteristic of primitive man, children, and those who preserve more of the natural state" (*Zibaldone* 947-48).

[36] "I firmly believe that even lizards and gnats think that the whole world was especially made for their species" (*Operette Morali* 91-3).

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, the roots of the concept reach as far back as Plato's *Symposium* (see 1.2). Indeed Leopardi's phrase "il troppo produce il nulla" (*Zibaldone* 1653, 2; 8 Sept. 1821)[37] characterizes the Italian poet's entire oeuvre, which conveys the paradoxical essence of life through a style built on syntactical, as well as logical, oppositions. Leopardi's poetics is based on a sentiment that, far from being opposed to the theoretical comprehension of things, derives from it. De Sanctis's description of Leopardian composition reveals the centrality of oppositions at the philosophical heart of his writings:

> 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)[38]

Although their criticism of Leopardi differs considerably, Benedetto Croce – who started a tradition that opposed Leopardi's poetry to his philosophy – followed De Sanctis in criticism of Leopardi. This school of thought – which also sees Leopardi's so-called pessimistic philosophy as a consequence of his personal unhappiness – forms part of the neo-positivism 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 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.

By now it is well established that Leopardi's philosophy is inextricably interlaced with his poetics, which explains the use of the term poet-*penseur*

[37] "[e]xcess produces nothing" (*Zibaldone* 760).

[38] "Because Leopardi produces an opposite effect to the one he attempts to create. 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 all notions of love, glory, and virtue illusory, and yet he fires 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 strong and vivid patriotic love" (my translation).

to describe him.[39] Leopardian poetics moves from a search for *noncuranza* (see 2.3.1), the "stato di tranquilla disperazione" (*Zibaldone* 618,2; 6 Feb. 1821)[40] and the "[i]speranza di esser quieto" (*Zibaldone* 4259,5; 24 March 1827),[41] to an abandonment of such aspirations. Stoic philosophy is initially perceived as the wisdom through which painful desire can be eradicated (see 2.2.): "dei beni umani il più supremo colmo è sentir meno il duolo" (*Zibaldone* 2673,3; 19 Feb. 1823).[42] 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*)[43] 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* 2472; 11 June 1822)[44]

[39] As B. Martinelli points out, the category of poet-*penseur* can already be found in Denis Diderot and Friedrich Schlegel before Martin Heidegger (140-41).

[40] "The calm, tranquil, and resigned despair" (*Zibaldone* 322).

[41] "[t]he aim and hope of finding peace" (*Zibaldone* 1890).

[42] "The supreme human good is to feel sorrow less" (*Zibaldone* 1112). 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 Leopardian criticism so few references are made to Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, with whom the poet 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*"; my translation). 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" (228; "the favourite philosophical masters for Leopardi were always the materialists and the sensists of the XVIII century"; my translation).

[43] Prior to this title, the previous title suggested in *Epistole in versi* in 1825 was "Massime morali sull'andare del manuale di Epitteto, Rochefoucauld ecc." 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 tentativo 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 to adapt to the reality of life were dominant, a phase Leopardi went through roughly between '24 and '27"; 219; my translation).

[44] "Today [I] shun and detest not only conversation but often even the presence of others at the time of these sensations. For no other reason than the habit I have developed of almost always keeping my own company, and of being silent most of the time, and of living among men as if in isolation and solitude." (*Zibaldone* 1044).

However, it is important to point out that Leopardi interprets Epictetus "a modo mio,"[45] that is, his own idiosyncratic way. Indeed, Leopardi both adheres to and refutes Epictetus' Stoicism. A year and a half after translating Epictetus, the Recanati poet admitted that Stoicism could be tedious and, rather than restoring peace to the soul, could bring about exasperation: "[S]ono stanco della vita, stanco dell' indifferenza filosofica, ch'è il solo rimedio de' mali e della noia, ma che in fine annoia essa medesima" (Letter to Francesco Puccinotti, 16 August 1827, in *Epistolario* 1366).[46]

Successive entries in the volume that was post-humously published as *Manuale di filosofia pratica* refute the aspired-for serenity of ataraxia ["atarassia," see 2.1] and, on various occasions, the suppressed desire erupts with full force (see 2.3; 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 to be elusive for Leopardi because desire affirms its limitlessness and boundlessness. At the heart of Leopardi's research is the perennial tension within the "inquietudine del desiderio."[47] 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"[48] cannot be, for Leopardi, a retreat into oblivion or a regression into the obscure zone of passivity; neither can it be a centripetal or 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," are themselves sources of a very palpable feeling. According to Leopardi, the *uomo sensibile*[49] needs physical, moral, and mental solitude unknown to the sociable, mundane individual (*Zibaldone* 635; 9 Feb 1821). This methodical internal life

> [c]ontribuisce 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. (*Zibaldone* 3678; 13 Oct. 1823)[50]

[45] "in my own way," my translation.

[46] "I am tired of life, tired of philosophical indifference, which is the only remedy to wrongdoings and boredom, but which, in the end, bores itself," my translation.

[47] "lack of quietude as a result of desire," my translation.

[48] "being carefree," my translation.

[49] "sensitive human being," my translation.

[50] "[h]elps to bring the imagination into play, to awaken and feed illusions, to make man rich in images and wild fancies, and with these he can easily do without activity and is sufficient to himself and finds pleasure in himself, to increase his internal life and action to the detriment of the external" (*Zibaldone* 1505).

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 "[d]isingannato profondamente e stabilmente, perché ha tutto profondamente e vivamente provato" (*Zibaldone* 1648; 7 Sept. 1821).[51] Sensitive beings are thus the most exposed to desire because they are "[p]iù sitibondi della felicità, e più inquieti da desiderii, cioè dal desiderio della propria felicità" (*Zibaldone* 3835, 1; 5 Nov. 1823).[52] Incidentally, 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. (*Zibaldone* 3842, 2; 6 Nov. 1823)[53]

This unlimited desire for life in the sensitive being subtends Leopardi's entire *teoria del piacere*.

Hence, while the teachings of Epictetus remain as a backdrop, Leopardi's analysis undercuts any attempt to isolate, negate, or repress desire. Leopardi upholds desire against the "geometria della ragione."[54] The ability to feel, and to desire, can bring about compassion – that is, the predispo-

[51] "[p]rofoundly and enduringly disenchanted, because he has experienced everything intensely and profoundly" (*Zibaldone* 757). Suffering is thus necessary to break through the crystallization of indifference and allow a return to creativity that had been entirely blocked by the "rassegnata disperazione" (*Zibaldone* 2161, 1; 24 Nov. 1821; "lethargic state of resignation," 934). Suffering allows the human being to live *au hasard*. Leopardi pits despair against limited desire and hope. Despair results from an unlimited desire, which is a characteristic trait of magnanimous persons who are (specifically because of this reason) destined to unhappiness. As argued in 3.2, Leopardi will propose the quietude of suffering which is evoked by the "lenta ginestra" ("pliant broom" v. 297). It is a suffering that evokes the pain endured by the people of Antiquity, a form of consolation pregnant with *eros* and *pathos* and which offers a different form of resistance that is attained by turning the tables on rationality. In this later poetry Leopardi needed to become a philosopher in order to realize that his ideas were no longer Vichian but Romantic.

[52] "[m]ore thirsty for happiness, and made more restless by desires, that is by the desire for his own happiness" (*Zibaldone* 1583).

[53] "As long as man thinks, he desires, because as much as he thinks, he loves himself. And at every moment, depending on how free and intact and with little impediment his faculty of thinking is, and to the extent to which he fully and intensely exercises it, his desiring is greater" (*Zibaldone* 1586-87).

[54] This does not mean that Leopardi at any point abandons reason. Sensism, 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. 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.

sition to suffer with the other (see 3.2). Leopardi thus places desire somewhat close to the surface, away from deep-seated ruminations within the self, and even while arguing for its dissolution, as Beckett will do in *Proust* (see 2.2), Leopardi makes a strong case for the necessity of its presence in human life (see 3.1; 3.2).

Conceptualized thus, 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.[55] Leopardi declares, however, the necessity of facing the impossibility of happiness. He asserts that only illusion, which in itself is false, can make one's life happy (*Zibaldone* 315, 2; 10 Nov. 1820). 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" (*Zibaldone* 1865; 7 Oct. 1821).[56] *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).[57]

Leopardi's exposition on desire in the posthumously collected *Manuale* is an exercise in self-analysis through observation of one's interaction with the other (see 3.2). This reflection reveals Leopardi's early grasp of the layers of desire that are deeply rooted in the human being, and paves the way for his investigation of the unconscious. For Leopardi human beings are self-divided, time-torn creatures. Indeed, it is specifically through the conception of internal splitting that Leopardi is a forerunner of Freud and Lacan.[58] Prefiguring Schopenhauer, Freud, and Lacan, Leopardi propos-

[55] The modern individual seeks a solitude that is different from the solitude of reflection or the search for wisdom that characterized the people of Antiquity. For the latter, solitude safeguarded the human being's naturalness and thus his being closer to a dream-like, creative, and primitive existence. Indeed for Leopardi the knot that ties illusions to happiness lies in Antiquity, where happiness and unhappiness were "solide, e solidamente opposte fra loro" (*Zibaldone* 338, 2; 18 Nov. 1820 ["solid, and solidly contrary to one another"]). 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.

[56] "Therefore, life and the absolute lack of illusion, and hence of hope, are mutually contradictory things" (*Zibaldone* 836).

[57] Leopardi's early attempts to recreate naïve poetry were necessary failures and they were bound to become sentimental (in a Schillerian sense) compositions by their very internal mechanism. His early "canzoni" express more of 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 the finite and the 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).

[58] Leopardian desire proves to be antithetical to the Aristotelian conception where desires are forms of intentional awareness, and therefore consciously con-

es *amor proprio* as an infinite force which cannot but perennially desire. This force concomitantly longs both to preserve the self and to still 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*" (*Zibaldone* 1574; 27 Aug. 1821).[59] 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 senz'amarsi, e questo amore essendo infinito, non può esser mai pago" (*Zibaldone* 1653, 1; 8 Sept. 1821).[60] Happiness is knowledge of "[u]n sistema, un complesso, un ordine, una vita d'illusioni indipendenti, e perciò stabili: non altro" (*Zibaldone* 636; 9 Feb. 1821).[61] A certain kind of superficiality is necessary to happiness where the human being "[s]i getta, per così dire, alla ventura in mezzo alle cose, agli avvenimenti" (*Zibaldone* 1580, 1; 28 Aug. 1821).[62] This knowledge 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 defines the Leopardian state of *noia*, a sentiment that approximates Beckett's habit and boredom. According to Leopardi, the human being is almost constantly in a state of *noia* because s/he can never cease to desire happiness, which is never truly forthcoming. For Leopardi, however, *noia* (as is also the case with Beckett's "suffering of being") could also denote the grandeur and aesthetic potential of human sensibility. As Leopardi states in *Pensieri*, "La noia è in qualche modo il più sublime dei sentimenti umani" (LXVIII).[63] According to this definition, *noia*

trollable, and where the truth of rational emotions can be distinguished from the falsity of irrational ones.

[59] "[feel this same inclination and desire] in so clear and *definite* a fashion as we feel it" (*Zibaldone* 729).

[60] "*man (or animal) cannot live without desiring*, because he cannot live without loving himself, and this love being infinite, he cannot ever be satisfied" (*Zibaldone* 759). Leopardi says 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.

[61] "[a] structure, an order, a life of independent and therefore stable illusions: nothing else" (*Zibaldone* 329).

[62] "[the … heart] launches itself, so to speak, at random in the midst of things, events, even amusements, etc." (*Zibaldone* 732).

[63] "*Noia* is in some ways the most sublime of human feelings" (LXVIII, Trans. W.S. Di Piero).

seems to connect to Plato's aesthetic cognition of things as pure Ideas (which would later be echoed by Schopenhauer), even though Leopardi ultimately refutes Platonic Ideas. The same resignation that accompanies *noia* is also experienced by the individual 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). In a passage that Beckett clearly echoes in *Proust*, but which Leopardi foreshadows in many excerpts, Schopenhauer states:

> 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 his psychoanalytic successors. Annihilating all forms of desire is indeed what Leopardi initially aspires to but finally refuses. 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 possible.[64]

The tension that characterizes Leopardian desire is thus between the infinite and terrible sublime as opposed to containment and confinement. 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.[65] Nonetheless, the fact that nothing can escape the *hic et nunc* gives us time to ask: from where does this tension towards that which goes beyond spatio-temporal limitations spring? Leopardi's answer is simple – the "facoltà immaginativa" (*Zibaldone* 167; 12-23 July 1820).[66]

The physical barrier of the "siepe" ("hedgerow" v.2) in "L'Infinito" represents the limits of finite reality, and the experience of such finiteness is

[64] Daniela Bini puts forward the idea that the idealistic moment in Leopardian philosophy is found in his poetry (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 poetry-as-ideal could prove hard to accept for anti-Crocean critics who are still suspicious of idealism.

[65] Indeed in the poem "L'Infinito," the poetic voice frees the imagination by painfully limiting its sensory perception through "l'ermo colle" ("lonely hill" v.1) 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.

[66] "imaginative faculty" (*Zibaldone* 130).

the mechanism which triggers in the imagination a longing for 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 universe in Leopardi's last poem, "La ginestra" (see 3.2). In this last poem, less than abandonment to the infinite, the infinitely sublime surroundings are now composed of real matter and no longer simply related to the imagination.[67] In "La ginestra," the human being has unveiled nature in her sublime senselessness and, through the power of reason, longs for that same sense of the sublime.[68] In "La ginestra," thought springs out in all its imaginative power from the frail, finite matter of one's being, proving its nobility by placing itself in the engulfing incomprehensibility of its existence. As is the case with the Levinasian desire discussed at the end of this chapter, Leopardian desire reaches out to the other in the context of such incomprehensibility.[69]

1.2.2 From Leopardian Desire to Schopenhauerian Will

Schopenhauer takes up the Leopardian notion of desire and points forward to Freud's reflections on the unconscious. Schopenhauer specifically praises Leopardi:

> [n]o 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

[67] In many passages in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi states 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 is to be found 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 our rationality.

[68] 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*.

[69] Desire for the other in Leopardi does not imply transferring one's desire onto another subject because that would bring about moral death. For Leopardi such an act would imply accepting the impossibility of happiness, which finds its scope in "Beneficenza" (*Zibaldone* 614, 2). The other is a limited human being and those limitations trigger the sensation of desiring the infinite. Concomitantly, the desire for the infinite, the desire for the absolute typical of magnanimous subjects, requires illusions and dreams. This Romantic message annuls Stoic teachings about control and limitation. It has to be stated, however, that in spite of what could be termed his Romantic spirit, Leopardi repeatedly attacked Romantic writers (see *Zibaldone* 191, 3 and also his essay "Discorso di un italiano sopra la poesia romantica").

> a wealth of imagery, that he never wearies us, but, on the contrary, has a diverting and stimulating effect. (*The World as Will and Representation* 2: XLVI).[70]

In the period that spans from Schopenhauer to Freud the great project of the Enlightenment runs aground on the obdurate core of desire (the struggle against Will, as Schopenhauer would term it),[71] which throws it alarmingly off 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).[72] Schopenhauer associates the "levels of the will's objectivation" to Plato's Ideas (and here the difference from Leopardi is clear cut), where Ideas are "always being and never becoming" (1: 154-55). The will finds in the human being, as a (Platonic) Idea, "its clearest and most perfect objectivation" (1: 178). In another passage that Beckett clearly echoes in *Proust*, and that Leopardi equally clearly anticipates, Schopenhauer describes human endeavour and desire as follows:

[70] 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*).

[71] I am certainly not equating desire and will. Eighteenth-century philosophers were greatly concerned with the distinction between the two. Starting with John Locke, desire is a consequence of uneasiness of the soul. Pleasure and pain accompany almost all our sensations. Furthermore, Locke argues that it is uneasiness rather than desire that spurs the will. In his theory of desire, Leopardi is clearly following Locke. From pleasure and pain come love and hate and, both for Locke and Leopardi, Desire and Will are consequences of uneasiness of the soul. See Bortolo Martinelli, 168-70.

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

> 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 2.1; 2.2),[73] which is clearly prefigured by Leopardi's *atarassia* tinged by *souffrance* and also announces Beckett's suffering of being (see 2.1), still proves elusive to complete will-lessness and desirelessness (see 2.3.2).[74]

Foreshadowing Freud and echoing the *eros-thanatos* dilemma at the heart of Leopardian poetics, Schopenhauer explains that the drive to reproduce is the most fundamental 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: 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). This negation is central to asceticism, which Schopenhauer construes as the "deliberate breaking of the will by forgoing what is pleas-

[73] For Schopenhauer 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).

[74] Negation of the will is, according to Schopenhauer, directly related to the Burkean Sublime, as is also one of the definitions Leopardi gives of *noia* (also see 2.1; 3.2). Schopenhauer explains the difference between the beautiful and the sublime as follows: "[w]hat 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 his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

ant and seeking what is unpleasant" (1: 419). This disquieting dichotomy between the will to life and the negation of this will becomes crucial to the drives Freud discusses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

1.3 Freudian Desire

The Freudian concept of desire (although "desire" is a non-Freudian term which owes much to the Leopardi-Schopenhauer-[Nietzsche, see 2.4] lineage) revolves around a subject whose identity is fixed in Oedipal repression.[75] In Freud's hands desire is once more formulated in terms of loss. From his earliest works, particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proposes that the expression of desire must as a rule be sought in dreams and thus in the unconscious. Lacan (whose notion of desire, as argued below, builds considerably on Freud's) amplifies the ways in which the dream has the structure of a rebus – that is, a form of writing (*Écrits* 221; 424):[76]

> 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).

Freud returns to Plato's *Symposium* (see 1.2), albeit completely inverting the Platonic search for a transcendent ideal in order to explain the inner struggle of human desire. Variations of desire as "wanting" traverse Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which defines the Freudian "wish" and "drive" (*Trieb*) – the latter crucially different from instinct.[77] The Freudian drive implies that which is impossible to fulfil in its very nam-

[75] 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).

[76] Although Lacan is greatly interested in Freud's early discoveries – the Unconscious, transference, the sexual life of children – he also draws on the later texts in which 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."

[77] 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).

ing.[78] 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). Freud pits internal forces tending towards self-assertion 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, Freud pits the pleasure principle against the reality principle, which is fought for by the equally forceful life forces (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 52). Freud describes the process of the death drive, which could be construed as conceptually close to the Lacanian Imaginary demand (see 1.4.2), and which we have termed "the desire not to desire," 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 *ataraxia* and Beckett's "suffering of being" (see 2.1). As Prete insists, *amor proprio* in Leopardi is not in contradiction with desire as it is similar to the quest at the heart of Freudian drives (17). This discussion also unwittingly steers our course back into Schopenhauer's harbour; Freud himself will quote Schopenhauer's phrase that death is the "[t]rue 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).

[78] Lacan's elusive descriptions foreground the transformations of desire as an elusive power: "[i]t 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).

The narratives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* most compellingly expose the struggle between life and death drives. 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 an unconscious fear of desire as an infinite, self-regenerative force, a motivating force that could well be called anti-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 to an absence. Likewise in Leopardi, 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, or what has never been. Leopardi grafts 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" (*Zibaldone* 644, 1; 11 Feb. 1821).[79]

Leopardi's combative poetic voices struggling to voice suffering through a cleaved subjectivity – as well as Beckett's dramatic characters which give voice to his conception of contemporary art where there is "[n]othing 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 Law and ordered in relation to the function of speech in its different forms, could be construed as significant to Leopardi's tormented poetic voices and Beckett's dramatic characters, who are ultimately prevented from attaining a rec-

[79] "The horror and fear man has, on the one hand, of nothingness and, on the other hand, *of eternity*" (*Zibaldone* 332).

onciliation with their speech. According to Lacan, 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 creates 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 stage at which the Lacanian subject starts splitting into "*moi*" and "*je*."[80] Lacan's description of the ego echoes a Leopardian desire superimposed on Freud's second topography id-ego-superego: "[what] was already glimpsed by the traditional moralists, who called it *amour-propre*" (*Écrits* 355). Lacan, however, asserts that all objects of one's desire are linked to the other's desire, emphasizing the crucial rupture within the ego in its relation to one's own body image.

1.4.1 The Freudian Model in Lacan

The Freudian drive already enfolds an absence, which is only a readable presence in enunciation. Starting with Freud, the unconscious is a chain of signifiers that insists on interfering in the cuts offered by actual discourse. As Lacan says, the most significant cut is the one that constitutes a bar between the signifier and the signified:[81]

> 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

[80] 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. In the mirror stage the infant identifies with the primary caregiver. This identification 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 "[t]he 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 becomes negation: "[t]he unconscious is the Other's discourse" (*Écrits* 10).

[81] 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).

> 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)

Lacan also designates the discovery of the linguistic phoneme in the same vocalic connation of presence and absence, the very foundations of Freud's doctrine intuited in the *Fort/Da* game:

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

Lacan amplifies the absence-presence dyad in the context of the Freudian theory of condensation and displacement. The theory is 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).[82] This theory links metaphor to being and metonymy to its lack.[83] 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" (*Écrits* 79). This moment reproposes the Freudian death-life struggle and is characterized by "primary narcissism" (*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

[82] 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).

[83] 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 adds, "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).

she is a subject divided by the signifying splitting.[84] Terry Eagleton offers the following explanation:

> 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)

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 chapter three, specifically in my discussion of the Leopardian poetic voices and the utterances of Beckett's dramatic characters.

1.4.2 Lacanian Demand and Desire: Anti-Desire and Desire

Lacan makes important distinctions when he links 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:

> [i]t 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)

[84] 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'" (*Écrits* 80). On the contrary, Lacan professes "to take as our point of departure the function of misrecognition that characterizes the ego" (*Écrits* 80).

Desire thus emerges with 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.[85] Lacan refers to this unconditional love as the *objet petit a*, defining it as "the absolute condition of desire" (*Écrits* 571). The past object sought by desire, the *objet petit a*, cannot be satisfied.[86] Lacan explains that desire emerges in the gap between demand and need (as the failure of demand to meet itself):

> 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: the signifier fails to articulate the signified. Desire displaces demand as the Symbolic "*je*" struggles against the "*moi*." Desire is that which fills the gap between the need for instinctual enjoyment and the demand that the m(other) fill this need. But in this request, the Other always already determines desire. The cleavage between "*moi*" and "*je*," demand and desire is there to remain: "[t]he *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 the Freudian death drive and Leopardi's *atarassia*. The desire for recognition, on the other hand, is the desire to be desired, itself linked to the desire to be a unity. Thus while demand is for and be-

[85] Introducing the phallus as the privileged signifier of 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).

[86] 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" (294).

cause 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 struggle of the Symbolic against the dominant image of the Imaginary – the clash between desire and demand – proliferates in the selected plays by Beckett and poems by Leopardi with the introduction of the O/other. In chapter three I will discuss the founding moment of subjectivity in Leopardi's and Beckett's presentation of the desire of the O/other by revisiting Lacan's "Mirror Stage," "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," and "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," comparing Lacan's notion of desire to that proposed by Levinas.

1.5 Levinas and the Desire of the Other

Levinas's concepts of desire evolve in stages. *Time and the Other*, in which he is still deeply phenomenological in method, introduces the basic premise that the subject is constituted through the intervention of the Other.[87] In this early work, to which I refer in my analysis of *Happy Days* in chapter three, the epitome of alterity and otherness (as will partially be the case for Leopardi as well in, for instance, "Alla sua donna") is the feminine (see 3.2). In *Totality and Infinity* the notion of desire is taken into the choppy domain of ethics.[88] 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.[89] *Otherwise than Being* further abstracts and theorizes the primacy of the ethical approach. In the following section I discuss Levinas's conceptions of need, desire, *eros*, and related topics in *Time and the Other* (1946-47), *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and *Otherwise*

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

[88] 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).

[89] 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, particularly in his last works, Levinas attempts to voice the original call to goodness of God's commandments. Clearly, I do not take my argument this far.

than Being (1974). These themes, all interconnected, are essential to developing a new perspective on Leopardian and Beckettian desire.

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 familiar with the strangeness of the other. Until union has been attained, there is disquietude manifested 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 for Levinas is thus desire 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 overwhelmingly Sublime Infinite (which possesses also infinite nullity) challenges the individual to redirect desire towards the other person.[90]

1.5.2 Metaphysical Desire, Transcendence, Infinity, and Height

Metaphysical desire is thus instigated by not being indifferent towards the other. Levinas explains: "the transcendence of the Other […] accounts

[90] 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 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*.

for freedom" (*TI* 225). This transcendence is, once again, manifested positively: "passing over to being's other, otherwise than being" (*OTB* 3).[91] 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).[92]

This relation is already fixed in the situation described by Descartes, and quoted by Levinas, where "[t]he '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: "[i]nfinity overflows the thought that thinks it" (*TI* 25).[93] In "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* Leopardi

[91] 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 "[t]o apprehend it out of an illuminated site it does not fill" (*TI* 190). Indeed in driving out darkness, the light does not arrest the incessant play of what he calls the "there is." Yet vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of the "there is". This deliverance from the horror of the "there is" is evinced in the state 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).

[92] 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).

[93] 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" (*TI* 93). The movement of the Cartesian cogito is a movement of descent toward the ever more profound abyss of the "there is". 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, "[g]auge[s] in advance the return of affirmation behind the negation" (*TI* 93). What Levinas adds to this Cartesian thought, however, is that "[t]o possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the 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).

and Beckett argue respectively for the idea of a frighteningly powerful infinite revealed, but not disclosed, through the other person who is Other (see 3.2; 3.3; 3.4).

Once it recognizes its material needs, the 'I' can thus turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, and becomes susceptible to desire. This susceptibility 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 (which is why the idea of Height is important):

> 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: "[l]'onesto e il retto / conversar cittadino / E giustizia e pietade" ("[a]n honest, / just society of citizens / and right and piety will take root"; lines 152-53). 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). In all three situations, the presence of the other person binds the self before it can enter into any contractual system of language and exchange. 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.

1.5.3 Totality

"Totality" in Levinas is a term that expresses the mode of depriving the being of its alterity.[94] 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

[94] Alterity is the unidentifiable. Its sense is the unilateral direction of an approach, caught in being ordered. The structure of the experience of alterity can be expressed in terms of temporality, which is the internal format of subjectivity.

general title ontology is appropriate" (*TI* 42). In chapter three I argue that Winnie (but also Clov) is initially neutralized as an object appearing by taking her 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 2.4; 3.1).[95] Levinas argues 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; it is rather the "epiphany" (*TI* 262) of the face that denudes a principle: "[w]e can proceed from the experience of totality back to a 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, "[i]n the total nudity of his defenseless eyes" (*TI* 199).[96] Here Levinas's thought returns to what is ultimately central to Leopardian ethics, which also infuses 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 2.4): "[s]ubjectivity, consciousness, the ego presuppose *Dasein*, which belongs to essence" (*OTB* 17). Levinas insists on what is beyond "essence": the "otherwise than being" (*OTB* 18), expressed as infinity. The subject, in what I refer to below as "Saying," presents itself as a sensibility. Subjectivity in Levinas is thus structured as responsibility and has an antecedent and autonomous structure.[97] It is

[95] In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas 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 2.4).

[96] The discussion about the eyes will be dealt with in some detail in the analysis of *Endgame*. 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.

[97] Levinas states, "Subjectivity of flesh and blood in matter – the signifyingness of sensibility, the-one-for-the-other itself– is the preoriginal signifyingness

in the incarnation of consciousness that subjectivity exposes itself to the exterior and commits to alterity.[98] In "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* the protagonists, obliged and thus subjected with regard to the neighbour, represent the breaking point but also the binding place where the infinite exceeds "essence." Subjectivity thus undoes "essence" by substituting itself for another, and in this act it is absorbed in signification, the "Saying" or the infinitive verb form.

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 with which alterity makes contact. I argue that this contact is central in "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*.

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 "[c]onversar cittadino, / E giustizia e pietade,"[99] 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.

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's 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 "caress," which Levinas describes as that which "transcends the sensible" (*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 a metaphor for the 'I' that marks this state of giving as the foundational mode of the subject's coming to be.

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

[99] "[j]ust society of citizens / and right and piety will take root" (vv. 152-53).

As in "La ginestra" and *Endgame*, for Levinas justice is incorporated in the desire of the Other which, despite being essentially murderous (in both Leopardi and Beckett the relation with the other is a clear source of suffering), is faced with the other representing 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 a 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; this is similar to Leopardi's vision of the modern individual threatened by disappearance 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 […] [I]t 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"; the latter term "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. The "Said", on the other hand, is the birthplace of ontology.[100]

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). This is because language now depends first on one-being-for-the-other, "Saying"; the existence of meaning, the "Said"; and time, the future and the past.

[100] "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" through means other 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 on 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", and the diachrony or emphasis. The "Said" is the intelligibility of system and synchrony, as opposed to the "Saying" which is the intelligibility of signifyingness itself; this 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).

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 in the Beckettian plays under scrutiny. Hamm, Nagg, and Willie wound the subject so that Clov, Nell, and Winnie expose themselves in their "Saying".[101]

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

Levinas focuses on the temporal structure of this ethical relation. He proposes that the relation with the Other has to enable the discontinuity of inner life so as to interrupt historical time. He states: "[t]he discontinuity of Cartesian time, which requires a continuous creation, indicates the very dispersion and plurality of created being" (*TI* 58).[102] Time is indeed defined by Levinas as "the postponement of death" (*TI* 232), because it is "the mode of existence and reality of a separated being that has entered into relation with the Other" (*TI* 232). In my analyses of *Endgame* and *Happy Days* I discuss the centrality of the otherness of death, particularly the way this otherness is counterpoised to the "nihilation of nothingness" (*TI* 234). The extraordinary everydayness of one's responsibility for other people is also the disregard for death, a clear opposition to the Heideggerean being-toward-death (see 2.4). 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).[103] In this light the 'I' wills in a non-egoist manner, a will that mirrors the essence of desire.

[101] *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 "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).

[102] Levinas 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).

[103] 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).

The Good thus chooses the 'I' before the 'I' can choose it.[104] Levinas is fond of recalling Plato's words, "the Good beyond Being": a good in itself and not in relation to need. Levinas quotes from *Phaedrus*: "[t]he 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 "[i]mmortality is not the objective of the first movement of Desire, but the other, the Stranger" (*TI* 63).[105] In these terms, the idea of Infinity is understood as Desire for the Infinite, "[w]hich 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 in opposition to one's will by substituting the 'I' for the other as a hostage. One finds oneself by being accused – a mode of self-discovery that is present in "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*.

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:[106] "It is the obsession by the other, my neighbour, accusing me of a fault which I have not committed freely" (*OTB* 92).[107] This is the "Saying", a passive exposure

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

[105] 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).

[106] 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. In a particularly Beckettian way, the word joins guilt to grammar. In my discussion of *Endgame* I use the term "accusative" in the Levinasian sense without the specifically Beckettian meaning attributed to this word in the above-mentioned texts.

[107] 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

to being, an exposure to death – invisible, premature and violent. I refer to this exposure to death and the idea of being accused in relating to the Other in the analysis of both *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 offering oneself to the other there lies a traumatic uniqueness. Levinas calls this process of 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.[108] The chosen works of Leopardi and Beckett echo Levinasian ethics because ethics itself,[109] as Simon Critchley says, "[i]s 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* 15).

This location of a point of otherness is the concept of suffering for the other for which I argue in "La ginestra," *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. I thus pit a Levinasian against a Lacanian desire, both equally pervasive in Leopardi's poetic voices and Beckett's dramatic personae. I argue for a suffering that is not focused on stilling desire, as is the case in the Beckettian "suffering of being" or Leopardian "*souffrance*." It is, however, this latter form of suffering to which, before delving into the textual analyses, we now need to turn.

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).

[108] 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).

[109] 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).

CHAPTER TWO

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 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 brooding core of human existence.

A word at the outset is 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 chapter three, where I contend 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*). Rather, I propose 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 to human suffering can be evinced. I will thus be arguing 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 in fact theorizes endlessly about the infinity of desire, the contradiction between the impulse to fulfillment and unconditional happiness and the reality of "*souffrance*." In the entire corpus of his work, Leopardi only advocates the removal of desire on relatively few occasions. On the contrary, for Leopardi the attempted removal of desire 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).

Beckett calls this irreducible desire in *Worstward Ho* the "[v]ain longing that vain longing go" (481), an endeavour that meanders through several centuries. This longing for the disappearance of desire could be compared to the Stoic ethical concept of ataraxia, Leopardian *atarassia*, and Scho-

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penhauer'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 the knowledge that he acquires through desirelessness (see introduction) become incommunicable, ineffective, and impossible, and this is the situation that Leopardi and Beckett affirm in their mature works. 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 "suffering of being" and "*souffrance*" – and the latter can 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 relation to the state of pain necessary for artistic endeavour.

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 this estrangement enhances the creative power of the imagination.[1] Leopardi specifically states that the creative power is heightened 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 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; 4 March 1821)[2]

This longed-for stillness comes close to the Stoic ataraxia (see 2.3.1), or Leopardian *atarassia* (see 1.2.1), best described as: "[n]on c'è maggior pia-

[1] 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. The Leopardian analysis of passions contains the debate central to the *idéologues*, from Destutt de Tracy to Maine de Biran.

[2] "A poet at the height of enthusiasm, passion, etc., is not a poet, that is, he is not able to compose poetry. Faced with nature, while his whole soul is preoccupied with the image of the infinite, while ideas crowd in on his mind, he is incapable of distinguishing, choosing, or seizing hold of any of them; in short, he is incapable of doing anything, or of plucking any fruit from his sensations, either in theory, in the shape of an observation and maxim, or in practice, as something to be put to use in writing. The infinite can be expressed only when it is not felt" (*Zibaldone* 358).

cere (né maggior felicità) nella vita che il non sentirla" (*Zibaldone* 3895; 20 Nov. 1823).[3] Leopardi's *atarassia*, however, has to be 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 paradoxical twist it evokes a sensation not only 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" (*Zibaldone* 2251, 1; 13 Dec. 1821).[4]

Beckett's "suffering of being," however, cannot be neatly grafted onto *atarassia* tinged by "*souffrance*," and it recalls another notion Leopardi would delve into: *noia*. *Noia* has more than one meaning and, while it refers to the boredom of existence, the explanation of this concept that Leopardi gives in his later work *Pensieri* 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*: "[l]a noia non è altro che il vuoto dell'anima, ch' è riempito, […] da quel pensiero, e occupato intieramente per quel punto" (*Zibaldone* 90, 2; 8 Jan 1820).[5] In another excerpt Leopardi states, "[a]nche il dolore che nasce dalla noia e dal sentimento della vanità delle cose è più tollerabile assai che la stessa noia" (*Zibaldone* 72, 2; 8 Jan 1820).[6] 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" (*Zibaldone* 1815,1).[7]

[3] "There is no greater pleasure (nor greater happiness) in life, than not to feel life" (*Zibaldone* 1617).

[4] "Everything that is ended […] *naturally* awakens in man a feeling of sorrow […] At the same time, it excites a pleasurable feeling, . . . and that is because of the infiniteness of the idea that is contained in the words *finito* [ended], *ultimo* [last]" (*Zibaldone* 963).

[5] "[b]oredom is nothing other than an emptiness of soul that is filled, […] and entirely occupied for that moment" (*Zibaldone* 85).

[6] "Even this pain of mine is vain, nothing. After a certain time it will pass and turn to nothing, and leave me in a universal emptiness" (*Zibaldone* 75). *Noia* is always strictly connected to the existential argument in the indices in the *Zibaldone* posthumously collected by Cacciapuoti and Prete as *Memorie della mia vita*. It is not a sentiment but the absence of sentiment.

[7] "Boredom is the most sterile of the human passions. Born of nothingness, it gives life to nothing. Not only is it sterile in itself, it also makes whatever it mingles with, whatever it draws close to, sterile, etc." (*Zibaldone* 818).

On the other hand, in *Pensieri*, *noia* becomes the most extreme form of the sublime in the spectrum of sentiments (see 1.2.1). Leopardi states:

> [i]l 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.
> […] 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; […] it seems to me that *noia* is the chief sign of the grandeur and nobility of human nature. This is why *noia* is practically unknown to unambitious men and scarcely or not at all known to other animals. (*Pensieri* LXVIII)

Sublime *noia* implies the dizzying experience of passing through empty interstellar spaces, which finds expression early in Leopardi with the poem "L'Infinito."[8] 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" ("the pure desire for happiness," 176; see 1.2.1). Sublime *noia* also paradoxically approximates the Stoic *piacere del fermarsi* ("the pleasure of cessation"). The attempt at cessation at the heart of *noia* (even when it is conceived as desire in its pure state) is necessary in order to feel the painful but aesthetically productive condition of "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being." As Matthew Feldman surmises in "Samuel Beckett's Early Development" with relation to the "suffering of being," "[f]or Beckett, achievements within the arts – as vehicles for the reflection necessary to apprehend, redeem and palliate painful human circumstances – become revelatory" (192).[9]

[8] 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).

[9] This outlook is also expressed by Beckett when he speaks, in a letter to MacGreevy dated 16 September 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 "[h]ad 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*

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 later in this section, 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 for 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 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" (28).

Beckett in *Proust* and Leopardi in "A se stesso" thus convey the messages that satisfaction is essentially only ever negative and that desire as lack is the prior condition for every pleasure: "whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable" (*Proust* 17). Both authors also imply that the human being desires without taking note that, as Schopenhauer would say, "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" rip apart in order to expose what underlies the Beckettian Habit and the Leopardian "assuefazione" (which is in turn based on Rousseau's *Habitude*, see 2.2). 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). For Leopardi, "assuefazione" has brought about the modern, physically and morally enfeebled individual in the grip of the age of positivism (see 2.2), who could be construed as foreshadowing Beckett's "ballast that chains the dog to his vomit" (*Proust* 19).

As is the case with Heidegger's *Dasein* (see 2.4), Beckettian Habit and Leopardian "assuefazione" live in the possibilities that permit us to flee from an authentic awareness of death (in Heidegger this is 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). The initial

227). In another letter to MacGreevy dated 14 August 1937, Beckett similarly praises the artist Jack B. Yeats: "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).

solution to the apathy that characterizes the Leopardian modern physically and morally weak individual (see 1.2.1), in Beckett similarly represented by the individual's "haze of […] [his] smug will to live" (*Proust* 15),[10] is the Stoic ataraxic bliss of the proverbial sage who is aloof from both jubilation and pain.

Leopardi seeks such ataraxic bliss through *atarassia*, central to *Manuale di Epitteto* (1825).[11] 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).[12] In the latter, Leopardi inches closer to grasping the necessary rules and regulations for internal equilibrium. At the same time, however, he also declares the impossibility of achieving such inner balance.

As the Italian poet demonstrates in his later works, and as Schopenhauer unequivocally claims, Stoic ethics "[i]s 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 distinguished from the way the Stoics were portrayed by, for instance, Schopenhauer, who reminds us that they "were never able to present their ideal, 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 Steven 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,

[10] It is clear that Beckett is here criticizing Nietzschean thought, particularly as professed in the posthumously published *The Will to Power*.

[11] Leopardi suggests that certain good things cannot be acquired, or certain evilness cannot be avoided, which stems from Stoic philosophy. The human being is only responsible for things which depend on his choices (*Zibaldone* 65, 1; 8 Jan 1820).

[12] 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 plenty, the little should suffice"; my translation).

"[t]hought is not rationally directed but obsessively suffered" (87). Rosen describes Beckett's treatment of "[t]he 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 an ideal, but what both writers ultimately uphold are sages who have failed.

2.2 "Souffrance" and "Suffering of being" in the pessimistic tradition

I now turn to a discussion of "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being" as perceived through a philosophically pessimist lens.[13] Rosen speaks of the "[t]horough 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 "[w]hile 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 "[t]he wit of introspective pessimists as Leopardi" (50). The latter is also described as Beckett's "spiritual precursor" (66). But what kind of pessimism have Leopardi and Beckett been associated with? Mark Bevir lists three types of pessimisms: existential, cultural, and metaphysical.

These three pessimist philosophical trends conceive the human condition as marked by severe and persistent 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, a pessimism that has been related to the logical result of the material constitution of the universe rather than to any metaphysical dimension of the human being, has been widely called, in Heideggerian terms, a form of *aletheia*, an uncovering of the nihilistic destiny of Western culture which is thus more in sync with existential pessimism (see 2.4). Existential Pessimists have also been associated with perceptions of human existence as absurd. Martin Esslin's famous categorization of Beckett as part of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd is very pertinent.[14] Both Leopardi and Beckett,

[13] 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."

[14] Martin Esslin grouped together playwrights like Beckett, Eugene Ionescu, and Harold Pinter and called their dramatic method the theatre of the absurd.

however, combat such absurdist notions of existence. Typical existential pessimism, in its quasi-Stoic distancing from human affairs, only pertains to the early phases of the two writers.

In his Preface to *Manuale di filosofia pratica* (part of the *Zibaldone*), Antonio Prete 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 in the Manual reveal how the label 'pessimism' is truly inappropriate when it comes to charting the development of 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. Leopardi's immediate heir and Beckett's primary influence when it comes to the possibility of desirelessness (and will-lessness) is Schopenhauer (see also 1.2.1; 1.2.2). Schopenhauer echoes the ubiquitous Leopardian "*souffrance*" when he states that one "[w]ill 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.[15] Beckett's thoughts on life as "*pensum*" are evident in his reading of the Italian "*artisan de ses malheurs*" (a clear reference to Leopardi).[16] Leopardi's "*souffrance*" and

[15] "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). *Weltschmerz* summarizes Beckett's engagement with literary and philosophical pessimism.

[16] 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 "[d]octrine 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

Beckett's "suffering of being" can thus be read as intermediated by Schopenhauer and construed in the quietist tradition, a central pillar of which thought is the rejection of desire (distinct from the Pyrrhonian '*epoché*'),[17] crucial to both Leopardian and Beckettian thought (Feldman, "Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 183-200).[18]

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 desire at the core of which is "*soufrance*," 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.[19] Indeed, the disparate features of pessimism, scepticism,[20] and melancholy contribute to the Quietist *Weltanschauung* from which Leopardi's, Schopenhauer's, and Beckett's writings emerge.

MacGreevy on 10 March 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).

[17] *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, it is only by refusing either to affirm or to deny the truth of what we cannot know that we can achieve ataraxia.

[18] 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; it underscores references from Thomas á Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and, even more prominently, St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

[19] 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. 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.

[20] By scepticism 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

Both Leopardi's "*souffrance*" and Beckett's "suffering of being" emphasize the aesthetic potential of this desire-free moment, in itself an engagement with the quietist tradition that is secular.[21] 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: "[t]he 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.

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 expresses Leopardian pessimism. Nixon also quotes a letter dated 21 April 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 of his career.[22] I argue that Leopardi in "La ginestra" and

skepticism as a healing alternative" (53). Beckett's scepticism is compared to "this ataraxy of self-thinking thought" (54), "a state of mental suspension and […] a state of unperturbedness or quietude" (54).

[21] 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).

[22] In the early indices of the *Zibaldone* 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" (*Zibaldone* 506; 15 Jan 1821) ["Thus, I was the only possible object of this hatred, neither having nor acknowledging any other person outside myself to whom I might complain of my woes, and hence no other object deserving of my hatred for this reason," *Zibaldone* 279]. 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

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" one finds the desires which have been displaced from their esteemed place in Antiquity and childhood. In emphasizing the latter, the Italian poet-philosopher clearly distances himself from his early ascetic model.[23] Leopardi will finally ascribe importance to desire by citing the people of Antiquity as the ones who were truly capable of experiencing its intensity.[24] Feldman's assertion that "Leopardi's conviction stands as a central buttress to Beckett's quietism" ("Samuel Beckett's Early Development" 186) is thus correct only insofar as it relates to the early phase of Leopardi.

Leopardi's "wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire" (*Proust* 18) is bequeathed to his immediate heir – Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's thoughts on desire, through which the Will manifests itself, become highly relevant when he pits the affirmation of Will against the negation of Will, an argument that prefigures the notion

somma nell'idea del suicidio" (*Zibaldone* 506; 15 Jan 1821) ["I conceived a furious self-loathing, since the unhappiness I hated had its seat in me alone," *Zibaldone* 279]. 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: "[n]on 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 etc. In maniera che la massima parte della sua vita si passa nell'indifferenza e conseguentemente nella noia, mancando d'impressioni forti e straordinarie" (*Zibaldone* 266,1;10 Oct. 1820) ["It could be said that human passions and feelings were at first on the surface, then they huddled deep in the darkest depths of the soul, and finally they arrived at the halfway point and stayed there. Because natural man, although very sensitive, can nevertheless be said to have his passions on the surface, giving vent to them with all manner of external actions suggested and intended by nature to provide an escape for the overwhelming rush and power of his feelings… The man who is no longer natural… keeps them all inside and gives only slight and equivocal signs of them," *Zibaldone* 180].

[23] 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."*

[24] "[e]ra 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" (*Zibaldone* 90; 8 Jan 1820) ["This was more commonly found among the ancients, for whom firmness, constancy, and strength and magnanimity were much more common virtues than among the moderns. And, seeing that the circumstances of life often, indeed very frequently, stood in opposition to their desires, they felt terror because of their obstinacy in desiring or directing their actions to that purpose," *Zibaldone* 85].

of desire (and the two-way system whereby desire both asserts and negates itself) as it evolves into its psychoanalytic version (see 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 1.3).[25]

According to 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 of the entire 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, involves vehement willing – as Levinas also points out (see 3.1).

The most intriguing 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 a blessed moment that the human being perceives as a timeless Idea.[26] Schopenhauer makes an argument that perfectly echoes the early works of Leopardi (despite the fact that Leopardi eventually refutes Platonic Ideas) where, in seeking rest from the "distracting contingencies" of desire, he resorts to the philosophy of Epicurus:

> [t]hen 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)

The price for this precious epiphany is nothing less than the wholesale dissolution of the subject – the same painful pit of Beckett's "suffering of being" and Leopardian "*souffrance*." An absolutely clean break between willing and will-lessness, desire and the ablation of desire does not seem to be achievable for human beings. Neither the self as an embodied, will-

[25] For Schopenhauer, "[t]he 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).

[26] 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).

driven individual, nor the self as a 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 crude 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 through the experience of desire one can sense an underlying suffering: a suffering that can bring about a compassion that is less Schopenhauerian than Levinasian because it is compassion brought about by the presence of desire rather than by its removal (see 3.1).

2.3 Leopardi and Beckett within the nihilist tradition

Schopenhauer's philosophy of the negation of the will has also been termed "passive nihilism" (*The Will to Power* 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).[27] Nietzsche is indeed a central figure in any discussion on nihilism.[28] In 1885-86, Ni-

[27] The conflation of the terms 'nihilism' and 'pessimism' is not uncommon. Paul Bourget, for instance, uses the term nihilism to describe 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).

[28] 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 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). Other 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.

etzsche speaks of "pessimism as a preliminary form of nihilism" (11) and pits "pessimism as decline" against the favourably looked-on "pessimism as strength" (11).[29] As in Shane Weller's distinction, the difference is between "[p]essimism 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). This quotation shows that "pessimism of strength" is Nietzsche's synonym for nihilism. In entry 91 in "European Nihilism" (in *The Will to Power*), Nietzsche criticizes the "[n]arrowness and inconsequence of pessimism à la Schopenhauer or, worse, Leopardi," [30] and admits that "this type of pessimism […] can be perceived here and there in my *Birth of Tragedy*" (56). Clearly Nietzsche's conception of pessimism is increasingly closely aligned to active nihilism.[31] It is also evident that while Leopardi and Schopenhauer are influential in Nietzsche's early works, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*, he later came to renounce their ideas.

[29] 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).

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

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

The Birth of Tragedy (1872) displays the influence of both Leopardi's and Schopenhauer's conceptions of art. Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian reminds us of Schopenhauer's distinction between the Thing-in-itself and the "*principium individuationis*."[32] Nietzsche's aesthetic interpretation, however, defines 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).[33]

While Dionysian art might be connected to artistic production in states-of-being similar to "*souffrance*" and "suffering of being," 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 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).[34] 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 artist that is at all possible" (153-54).[35]

Rather than proposing an overcoming of nihilism in Nietzchean fashion, or any overcoming of nihilism at all, 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 lit-

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

[33] In *The Birth of Tragedy* he claims that Attic tragedy renders the truth about existence 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 would continue to describe art as both veiling and transfiguring but it is clearly the latter idea that will come to dominate his thinking about art. As Weller points out, however, "[t]here 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).

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

[35] In *The Will to Power* "[d]isintegration 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). Simultaneously, however, Nietzsche 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).

erary works, I argue, combat "nothingness" through the compassionate desire of the Other and, indirectly, 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 a desire that, in facing the finite, intuits a Sublime infinite.

2.3.1 Leopardi the nihilist

The "nothingness" against which this study pits the notion of infinity has been perceived as crucial ever since the first authoritative opinions on Leopardi expressed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (see 1.2.2; 2.3). The radically polarized positions expressed by Benedetto Croce and Emanuele Severino, at the two opposite chronological 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 and 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* (in 1990) and *Cosa arcana e stupenda: L'Occidente e Leopardi* (in 1997). Arguing that Leopardi's works bring into light the general movement of Western history and philosophy, Severino defined Leopardi as the most radical nihilist thinker of the Italian philosophical tradition.

These interpretations of Leopardi as a writer with a clear focus on existential nothingness are obviously not unfounded. In passages collected in one of the six volumes in the Donzelli edition of the *Zibaldone*, posthumously entitled *Della natura degli uomini e delle cose*, Leopardi presents the anguish of the human being facing nothingness. Leopardi foresaw the scenario of modernity. He accurately predicted the bleakness that defines modern civilization: the loss of absolutes, the blindness of the progressive and positivist myth, the annulment of time, and the solipsistic egotism of the self. This bleak prediction reaches its climax in Leopardi's 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" (*Zibaldone* 506; 15 Jan. 1821).[36]

[36] "I conceived an ardent desire to take vengeance upon myself, and with my life to take vengeance on that necessary unhappiness that was inseparable from my existence, and I felt a fierce but supreme joy in the idea of suicide" (*Zibaldone* 279). The collection of these indices has been compared to Montaigne's *Essais* even though Leopardi never acknowledged the influence of this writer. See *Introduzione*

Leopardi describes the modern human being as mostly indifferent and apathetic towards life. This state is almost entirely unknown to the ancients. He distinguishes two main types of modern individual. According to the first description, this individual represses feelings (desire included) but, as in the Freudian hydraulic model proposed in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, s/he is anything but a desire-free being and lives in quiet despair. Desire in such a person 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)" (*Zibaldone* 619; 6 Feb. 1821).[37]

The second Leopardian delineation of the perfectly modern human being, however, prefigures the tone of indifference and nihilism of some of Beckett's later drama. This is the modern human being the likes of whom "[i]l mondo è pieno oggidì" (*Zibaldone* 620; 6 Feb. 1821).[38] This individual is not even capable of hating himself because "[l]'uomo non ha più tanto amor proprio da aver forza di odiarsi" (*Zibaldone* 619; 6 Feb. 1821; see 1.2.1).[39] In this state, the human being is depleted of compassion because his faculties have numbed "[t]utta la facoltà sensitiva, desiderativa etc." (*Zibaldone* 619; 6 Feb. 1821).[40] This is once more proximate to Beckettian Boredom and Habit, where the human being is similarly merely able to live out of habit and, as Leopardi puts it, "[t]enere una vita metodica, e di nulla mutare o innovare" (*Zibaldone* 619; 6 Feb. 1821).[41] The consequences of this "stato di tranquilla disperazione" (*Zibaldone* 619; 6 Feb. 1821)[42] is that *amor proprio*, a quality that is abundant in Antiquity, is transmuted into what Leopardi terms "*inazione*" [inaction], "*indifferenza*" [indifference], and "*assuefazione*" [habituation]. 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" (*Zibaldone* 958, 1; 19

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, and J.-J Rousseau is similarly important to both.

[37] "[h]atred of the self (because man still has sufficiently strong self-love to be able to hate himself)" (*Zibaldone* 323).

[38] "[t]he world is full nowadays of despairing persons of this second kind" (*Zibaldone* 323).

[39] "[m]an no longer has enough self-love to have the strength to hate himself" (*Zibaldone* 323).

[40] "[h]as covered with a callus the whole of the sensitive, desiring, etc., faculty" (*Zibaldone* 323).

[41] "[t]o preserve the existing state of affairs, to lead a regular life, and not to change or begin anything new" (*Zibaldone* 323).

[42] "this state of quiet despair" (*Zibaldone* 322).

April 1821),[43] 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* as the passion that locks the subject into neurotic isolation, which explains why, in 958, 1, Leopardi links self-love to "Sventura" [Misfortune].[44] Excessive *amor proprio* enervates the modern human being because excessive desire and an overabundance of imagination impede action: "[s]pesse volte il troppo o l'eccesso è padre del nulla" (*Zibaldone* 714, 1; 4 March 1821).[45] The limiting force of *amor proprio* in Leopardi, as had been the case for Rousseau, is the *mauvaise honte*.[46]

It is interesting to note that in *Pensieri* Leopardi defines with bitter clarity the malice underlying the *amor proprio* at the heart of Leopardian desire. Linking it to his analysis of "timore" ("fear;" see 1.2.1), he defines self-love as the most perfect and quintessential expression of egoism. *Amor proprio*, and fear of what is exterior to it, brings about this self-ab-

[43] "But love of self is the only possible spring of human actions and feelings" (*Zibaldone* 453). *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.

[44] Leopardi states: "[s]e 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" (*Zibaldone* 669,1; 17 Feb. 1821) ["[i]f egoism is complete, society exists only in name. Because when each individual has only himself as a goal, and pays no heed at all to the common good, and when no thought or action of his is designed to further the good or pleasure of others, each individual by himself forms a society apart, complete and utterly distinct, since his goal is wholly distinct," *Zibaldone* 342].

[45] "Too much, or excess, is often the father of nothing" (*Zibaldone* 357). Excessive *amor proprio* inhibits action – that which makes morality possible – in those who are extremely sensitive. *Amor proprio*, *Vitalità* and *Sensibilità* are brought together in 4037, 6. This *amor proprio* is different from the "cura del sé" 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" (*Zibaldone* 714, 1; 5 March 1821) ["An excess of sensations, or their superabundance, turns into insensibility. It gives rise to indolence and inactivity," *Zibaldone* 357].

[46] Rousseau's *mauvaise honte*, which Leopardi somewhat assimilates, is the inertia which impedes social relations and, in the bored and desperate human being, contrasts with the ease with which he dismisses anything human. The same desperate modern individual, who is not intimidated by death, fears society. In the face of interrelationships he loses his courage, because of the fear of being ridiculed. This fear provokes the inability to act and to change "[p]er 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" (*Zibaldone* 3492; 22 Sept. 1823) ["[f]or fear of worsening that life by which he no longer sets any store and of which he despairs, which to him seems like it cannot become any worse," *Zibaldone* 1428].

sorbed state of being suspended in a timeless vacuum and in total centripetal activity as a result of "incivilimento."[47] This second description of the modern individual that Leopardi provides could indeed justifiably be designated 'nihilistic.'

Nonetheless, reconnecting once again to the world of Antiquity, Leopardi identifies the other side of desire of *amor proprio* (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 is linked to an archetypal imagination and where knowledge has its roots.[48] The way to reconnect to these roots is to reach out to nature through our present civilization. This attempt at 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; 22 Oct. 1820, see 3.1; 3.2).[49] Through this proposition, Leopardi encourages his readers to pursue not nothingness but the infinite transfiguration of desire into illusion.

2.3.2 Beckett the nihilist: Ubi nihil vales, Ibi nihil velis

Beckett is also often associated with the expression of nothingness. However, despite the centrality of nothingness in his work, Beckett vehemently rejected the nihilist label: "I simply cannot understand why some people call me a nihilist. There is no basis for that" (qtd. Büttner 122). By the time of post-structuralism critics had established Beckett as a classically nihilist writer. In *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* Shane Weller points out, however, that Beckett's writing has been perceived to attest rather to anti-nihilism. This is especially the case in deconsructionist criticism, but it was already anticipated by Theodor Adorno. 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. Among the most prominent anti-nihilist readings of Beckett are critiques by Alain Badiou and Critchley. Badiou declares that he is "entirely opposed to the widely held view that Beckett moved towards a nihilistic destitution, towards a radical opacity of significations" (*On Beckett* 55). As I discuss in 3.3, 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) similarly dismisses the nihilist label as the "stalest of all the stale philosophical clichés" (*Very Little… Almost Nothing* 176).

[47] "civil education"; preface to *Trattato* XII; my translation.

[48] 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."

[49] "turn reason into passion" (*Zibaldone* 191).

Critchley insists that Beckett offers "[a]n approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption" (179). 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 a resistance to nihilism in Beckett that lies specifically in the "residual difference" deployed in his work (*A Taste for the Negative* 137). Similarly, Derrida sees in Beckett's work both nihilism and resistance to nihilism. He explains that nihilism is located in the content but, crucially, that 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 certainly falls into 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. 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 negation of alterity is a form of violence that does not leave space for the other (92). Along similar lines, in chapter three I argue that Beckett's works resist nihilism specifically by opening a space for alterity.

In "Three Dialogues" Beckett tries to come to theoretical terms with the possibility of an art that defines itself outside the quest for closure in a writing that is aporetic in nature. Negation is here the very work of language concerned with the presence of things before consciousness.[50] The desire for "repose" from desire, the latter resulting only in suffering (as long as it remains unsatisfied) and boredom (as soon as it is satisfied), does not lie in nothingness. 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).[51]

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 "[t]o 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

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

[51] 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."

exposed when the negation of art interrupts life (as habit). This piercing into habit provides 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 opposite: the infinite.

Cioran conceives of a position in Beckett that is closer to skepticism than nihilism and that explores the notion of nothingness as a starting 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)

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 a maxim from Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*.[52] In a 1967 letter (later reprinted in *Disjecta*), Beckett writes: "[i]f 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 often attributed to Democritus. Beckett's juxtaposition of Geulincx and Democritus – and the suggestion that this could be an entry point to the study of his own work – points towards a productive argument to be had between the two philosophers on the subject of nothingness.

The time-honored centrality of Democritus's guffaw for Beckett's work does anything but prove his nihilism. Democritus's 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*" ("*Murphy, Geulincx*" 206), direct references to Geulincx elsewhere have not, so far, been identified. Instead, the maxim "*ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*" is countered by theatrical characters who not only want but who also puzzle over an ethical dimension to their wanting. This ethical dimension is less concerned with exulting nothingness than with evoking a sense of the infinite.

[52] "[w]here you are worth nothing, you should want nothing" (my translation).

2.4 "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. Leopardi's poems, such as "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia," have been read as marvelous expressions of existential anguish.[53] In arguing that Leopardi and Beckett both crucially reintroduce desire into their work (see chapter three), I will emphasize a Levinasian desire that is in dialectical opposition with the teachings of Heidegger, among others. Heidegger's thoughts on nihilism greatly expand Nietzsche's; indeed a critique of the latter comes to occupy a central place in Heidegger's work in the 1930s.[54] 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 overcoming nihilism.[55]

For Heidegger, the essence of nihilism lies in the negation of the difference between Being and beings. In his view, Nietzsche's proposal that nihilism can be overcome through a revaluation of all values is in fact the consummation of nihilism as the forgetting of Being.[56] To recognize the nihilism and the decline in the forgetting of Being is, according to Heidegger, pivotal. By recognizing the deracination brought about by 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."[57] This underlying "truth" could, to a degree,

[53] Thinkers like Albert Camus would give expression to the existential questions prefigured by Leopardi on desire. Camus states that the absurdity of the human predicament lies in the "[d]ivorce 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).

[54] 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).

[55] "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).

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

[57] 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

be equated with the Leopardian "*souffrance*" and the Beckettian "suffering of being." What is common to all three notions is the striving towards their essential core, which is a way to move away from inauthenticity (a merely generalized, undistinguished, and anonymous "anyone") towards authenticity. In Heidegger's words this implies "resoluteness of being in the face of death" (*Nietzsche* 679).[58]

However Levinas repudiates this idea by insisting that death is, on the contrary, the most Other.[59] Levinas claims that Heidegger, along with other existentialist thinkers, actually failed to focus on what Levinas 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.[60] In 3.3, where I analyze Beckett's *Endgame*, I argue that such a concern also troubles the immediate post-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 essence of man, and only in that sequence at the same time a human concern" (*Nietzsche* 4: 221).

[58] 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 "[o]pens up, in its own way, the being of beings" (19).

[59] 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).

[60] Another philosopher to turn the tables famously on Heidegger's emphasis on Being is Theodor Adorno, who sees Heidegger's conception of Being as nihilism because it is 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.

> 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. (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).[61] The Levinasian "need," and more emphatically Levinasian desire (see 1.5), provides 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).

[61] In Levinas, the self is initially conceived as anonymous and striving to become conscious of itself. This state is Levinas's "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's 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's immemorial past or 'an-archy.' Levinas's way out of the *il y a*, is through the confrontation with suffering in the face-to-face relationship and thus through an ethical response to suffering.

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's 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 different from absorption of the ego. The act of 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 following chapter I attempt to show how in the infinite desire at the heart of compassion, states of being like *il y a*, "suffering of being," and "*souffrance*" all have the possibility of exit. It is possible to find in the desire of the Other and the suffering that it entails an ethical encounter that impedes the self's solipsistic disintegration.

CHAPTER THREE

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.

This chapter reads Lacanian and Levinasian desire side by side, a comparative reading that is central to the subsequent analyses of desire in Leopardi's and Beckett's texts.[1] 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 intersection with language and discourse. I then explore the latter connection in Lacan's "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 my subsequent textual examination, in which both Lacanian and Levinasian desire can be read in Leopardi's and Beckett's texts. I first examine Leopardi's post-1828 lyrical output leading up to the *ciclo d'Aspasia* poems. I then analyze one of the last *canti*, "La ginestra o il fiore del deserto." Following this, I proceed to a reading of Beckett's plays *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, where I exclusively focus on the dramatic rather than the theatrical text.[2]

My aim is twofold. I intend to show how Leopardi's and Beckett's texts are permeated by a desire that can be conceived as, firstly, Lacanian. But I also argue that Leopardian and Beckettian desire can simultaneously be

[1] It is here pertinent to point out that psychoanalytic studies have 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 also 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 for 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*.

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

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construed as Levinasian. I thus propose 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. The Leopardian and Beckettian torn subjects under scrutiny infinitely long for a reunification with the Other in a perfectly blissful past that never occurred. This desire is a frustrated longing whose aggression is transferred onto language. On its obverse side, however, the Other could very well fit 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 takes precedence over the self's freedom and decision.

Levinas first defines the Other in *Time and the Other*, where "[t]he 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 works I read a desire that hollows out and accentuates dearth and is in this respect Lacanian. It is also, nonetheless, a challenging desire that compels the individual towards responsibility and, very significantly, towards a very unique kind of Levinasian compassion.[3] The discomforting desire of the Other gives birth to speech as the possibility of communication, the Levinasian "Saying" rather than the "Said" (see 1.5.6), a substitution for the Other in which a unique kind of compassion can be found. Hence, in Leopardi and Beckett, the linguistic encounter is both Lacanian in its emptying effect, as well as Levinasian in the way it is an encounter with singularity, a saying that acts as a sign of the Levinasian being-for-the-other. This original approach to the other gives birth to language and the possibility of exchange. Through the ethical encounter, through the linguistic approach of the other, language is not only transcended, but comes itself 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. 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 a breach in the subject. 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.

[3] Levinas explains the conditions that make compassion possible 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).

I first read Leopardi's poems as defined by the self-denial of the poetic I and the regressive movement of Imaginary desire (see 1.4.2). The poetic voice is simultaneously permeated by an equally pugnacious combative spirit. This tendency for self-denial is strongly countered by the time Leopardi writes his *ultimus cantus*, "La ginestra." The increasingly pressing concern to confront the irritating strangeness of the face-to-face encounter and the struggle to become a desiring being-for-the-Other are pivotal in Leopardi's last major poem. The poetic voice in "La ginestra" encourages the individual to seek solace by forging a social chain ("La ginestra" in *Canti* 296-97). The individual is asked to communicate with an otherwise hostile other and, as in the Levinasian Other, to find his/her strength in addressing and being-for-this-Other. Solidarity among human beings 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*.[4] In the *Operette morali*, specifically in "Dialogo di Plotino e Porfirio," the two protagonists manifest this same alliance in misery when they finally agree to forge a pact which prefigures the "social catena" in "La ginestra." This social chain represents an attempt to resist the burden of human existence by shouldering responsibility for the other, who is ultimately Other.[5]

My second aim is to concentrate on this form of desire in the Leopardian and Beckettian literary subjects and explore how desire resists nihilism. This desire 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 the protagonists Clov, Nell, and Winnie to their difficult task in facing the other person who, directly or indirectly, has called the "self" to be ethically responsible. In *Endgame*, the direct and unmediated urge to speak is unmistakable in the dialogue.

[4] 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" (*Zibaldone* 945,2; 16 April 1821) ["And still, however, I say that any man capable of thinking for himself, anyone who enters with his own faculties, and if I may put it like this, walks with his own feet, into the consideration of the nature of things, in short, any genuine thinker, absolutely cannot manage without forming for himself, or following, or generally having a system," *Zibaldone* 447].

[5] Society for Leopardi is characterized by its Machiavellism: "Veramente e perfettamente compassionevoli, non si possono trovare fra gli uomini" (*Zibaldone* 4287, 1; 23 July 1827) ["True and perfect compassion cannot be found among men," *Zibaldone* 1911]. In Leopardi the "fratelli" (brothers/neighbours), who need to be talked and listened to and with whom a society based on solidarity has to be formed, are characterized by their otherness.

Happy Days contains lengthy monologues punctuated by little response. This style highlights the urge to escape the tormenting and self-absorbing mechanisms of the mind, and particularly the unconscious, underlying the play's 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 tormenting the self. The attenuation of pain becomes possible not through cleansing oneself of desire, as was the case in *Proust* and, in part, in Leopardi's "A se stesso" (see 2.1), but through the complete and lasting renunciation of desire. In that renunciation lies the affirmation not only that desire ineluctably survives, but also that it is just possible, through desire, to intuit the infinite.

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. Francesco De Sanctis already highlighted this paradoxical aspect in the nineteenth century, pointing out that the affirmation implied in Leopardian negation underscores an important reflection on desire (*Leopardi* 276). Leopardian art is founded on an inconclusive openendedness that 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, perennially burdens the being in its perforating force. On the other hand, 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." It can also be witnessed in Winnie's desperate attempt to be a being-for-Willie, as well as in the poetic voice in "La ginestra," which professes to be-for-one's-neighbour. Furthermore, in these Beckettian dramatic characters and Leopardian poetic voices, the other distinctively stands out in his/her 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[6] oscillate between being torn subjects unable to reconcile with themselves while being inexorably bent on addressing, suffering, and, almost against their will, desiring-the-good-of-the-Other. In short, I construe these poetic voices and dramatic personae as paradoxically capable of a unique kind of compassion.[7]

[6] 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" (*Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive,* 6).

[7] The search for the good is only applicable to Levinasian desire. For Lacan, 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 de-

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 on the one hand, and the static image of the Imaginary on the other. 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 one evinces the infinite desire for the Other. There is indeed parallelism between Leopardi and Beckett in their philosophy of resistance to the sense of nothingness; they both acknowledge desire as the ultimate minimal remainder that can bring about a unique kind of compassion. In this light, Beckett's antidote to the aporia of living is more in sync with that of Leopardi than has been acknowledged so far.

3.1 Lacanian versus Levinasian Desire

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 difference, both authors problematize the notion of desire rooted in subjectivity and both construe the role played by 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 responsible to oneself and, above all, to others. Furthermore, for both Lacan and Levinas, the subject's sexed position calls it into relation with another and a preexisting system of meaning predicates the subject's ability to speak.[8]

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

sire. 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).

[8] However, only for Levinas (and I shall say more about this below) does this pre-existing system indicate an ethical order prior to signification.

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 unrooting of desire, which leads to the understanding of psychic conflict lodged within the Unconscious. As explained in 1.4, Lacan is concerned with the way language manifests the vicissitudes of the drives. As a result, Lacan proposes that meaning is occluded and only partially available through an examination of extraneous phenomena. In Levinasian thought, on the other hand, meaning emerges through strict philosophical analysis. Levinas's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* and *Otherwise than Being* deal with language but more from a conscious, moral angle and, at least in the former work, from a point of view that still recalls a phenomenological approach.[9] Levinas claims human consciousness as an essential starting point, even though he posits transcendence beyond mundane consciousness.[10] For Levinas, I argue below, it is the "an-archic" foundation from the past that structures subjects' desire for-the-Other.[11] Both Lacan and Levinas thus deal with ethical subjectivity, expressed in the ethical demand of the Other as the grounding hermeneutic horizon.[12]

3.1.1 Lacanian alongside Levinasian Desire

The point of departure for both Lacanian and Levinasian desire is the intervention of the other. The linguistic system undergirds both Lacan's

[9] In the first book Levinas focuses on ethics and alterity, and 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."

[10] Unlike Edmund Husserl, Levinas will insist on a radical transcendence; that is, a transcendence beyond human consciousness (see 2.4).

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

[12] 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).

and Levinas's thought and the linguistic order emerges in their respective modes of thinking. In Lacan the linguistic order is that through which the subject comes to be while for Levinas it is that by which the subject becomes situated. 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 the identity of the other. As a result, the desire of the other becomes, though 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, from the humanist paradigm into the post-humanist (see 1.1). The self now finds itself a subject in and through the eyes of the other. Desire is rooted in the creation of the imaginary ego-self in Lacan and the construction of the subject in Levinas as marked by the linguistic intervention of the Other.

A key difference, however, remains. Lacan's critique of ego psychology and the de-centred subject (see 1.4.1) is different from Levinas's vision of the "self." The Levinasian "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 entirely for the other person and it redirects its desire to the other as Other. Levinasian humanism concerning the other person retains the unity associated with traditional 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 describing what Lacan conceives of as a torn subject, Levinas redirects desire towards the other person. In this redirection, Levinas invites transcendence beyond self-centric needs and towards the subsequent discovery of a desire that goes beyond 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 the 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!][13] This declaration implies 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*

[13] 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" (146).

and Infinity 95).[14] 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 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" (*TI* 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 figured by the Symbolic order.[15] For Levinas a conception of the ethical is possible beyond language and ontology in the concept of "an-archy."[16]

In spite of these divergences, I agree with Critchley when he suggests that the Lacanian conception of the Other can be woven through the Levinasian version, as can all three Lacanian registers of Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic. 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 relate Lacan's description of the encounter with the Real to Levinas's description of the encounter with the face. This grafts Lacan too neatly onto Levinas and, as Ross Fryer points out, it overlooks that the Real only exists in relation to the Symbolic, while the face is an-archic and stands outside the realm of

[14] The meaning of suffering in Levinas's *Time and the Other* is directly linked to the solitude of the existent to which I refer in my 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 2.4.

[15] 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*.

[16] Indeed for Levinas it is not just the possibility of the good-beyond-being but also the God beyond being, into which I do not specifically delve. However, for Levinas the word God signifies something otherwise than presence and immanence: "[t]he 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.

discursive signification including the Lacanian Symbolic (*The Intervention of the Other* 217-8).

My grafting of Lacan onto Levinas is loose, hinting at similarity not congruence. In the textual analyses that follow Lacanian and Levinasian desire will be pitted against each other and not superimposed. At the centre of Levinas's 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.[17] From the viewpoint of the Symbolic order it is also relevant to point out that for Levinas the Other bears the same responsibility for the subject as the subject does 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. This Other is mediated by an accusative language that elects the poetic voice in "La ginestra," as well as Clov, Nell and Winnie respectively. Following the encounter with the other, the poetic 'I' in "La ginestra," Clov and Nell in *Endgame* and Winnie in *Happy Days* have to shoulder the responsibility and find in themselves the unique compassion for the bruising presence of the other.

3.1.2 Revisiting Lacanian Desire

I will now turn to an examination of Lacanian desire *per se* before proceeding to literary analyses of Leopardi and Beckett later in the chapter. 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.[18] 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

[17] 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 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. Van Pelt focuses almost exclusively on the other two registers.

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

the three orders) to either poetic voices or dramatic characters. While I attempt to illustrate how the notion of desire manifests 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 voices and 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 voices and Beckett's dramatic personae.

As explored by Lacan in his Mirror Stage essay, referred to in 1.4.1, desire emerges in the linguistic expression of a repressed longing to return to a never-occurred primordial perfection. The foundational moment for the creation of the 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 for the characters in *Endgame* and *Happy Days* to whom I attribute the role of the 'I', the Other remains distant, elusive, larger-than-life, in some cases almost a fiction. It is precisely in this fictive quality of the subject, and the subject's own unconscious feelings of not-knowing and incompleteness, that the Unconscious exerts 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. The poetic voices and dramatic personae have displaced desire onto other objects, but particularly onto language, and it is through the upbraiding, accusative aspect of language that they attempt to mediate their way to the other.

The displacement of desire onto the image of the fragmented body is crucial to Lacan's "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis." Lacan claims that "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 which reflects aggression is present in both the self-denial 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 is created during the formation of the ego, and the fundamentally alienating process of taking up an identity by splitting 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). 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 alienating. As a result, the Leopardian and Beckettian language is also betraying and competitive because, for both authors, 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. It becomes increasingly evident that, in both Leopardi's and Beckett's work, alongside the inner sense of loss and despair one can detect a hint of the solace that the obligation for the other can offer. Indeed, where Lacan sees aggression and competition, Levinas sees responsibility and obligation.

In the emphasis on responsibility and obligation, Levinas is frontally attacking Heidegger's phenomenology in the tradition of hermeneutic philosophy of Being (see 1.5, 2.4). In *Time and the Other* Levinas argues: "[s]ociality 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).[19] 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 philosophy is 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).

In Leopardi's and Beckett's texts ethical philosophy goes beyond the ontology of Being and the emphasis is evidently on the suffering involved in one's being- for- the- neighbour-as-stranger.

Levinas proposes that only this ethical relation permits us to transcend the isolation and aloneness of Being.[20] He repudiates the Heideggerian notion of being-toward-Death and instead he defines death as the most Oth-

[19] 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.

[20] Derrida has noted that the history of Western philosophy – especially the philosopher Levinas is here criticizing, Heidegger – has not understood existence in this way. Instead, "being is nothing outside the existent, does not precede it; and

er (see 2.4).[21] 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 consolidates a far-reaching critique of the Western philosophical tradition, primarily Judeo-Christian philosophy. Leopardi had been among the first to launch an attack on this tradition. The Italian poet is vociferous against the Western philosophical tradition in many *Zibaldone* indices collected posthumously in *Trattato delle passioni* and in statements like "convertir la ragione in passione" (*Zibaldone* 293,1; 22 Oct. 1820).[22] Similarly, philosophy according to Levinas 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).[23] The wisdom of love opens a path to Levinas's notion of substitution as the foundation of subjectivity, which I construe as foreshadowed by Leopardi's conception of compassion.[24] In Leopardi compassion is possible at the sight of others' effort. The other's suffering "[m]ette l'anima in una certa azione, e le comunica una certa attività interiore, la rompe etc. L'esercita da lontano etc. E par ch'ella ne ritorni più forte, ed esercitata etc." (*Zibaldone* 2017,3;

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).

[21] 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).

[22] "turn reason into passion" (*Zibaldone* 191). 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, né alcuno è mai tanto infiammato per giovare altrui quanto a se" (55,1; 8 Jan 1820) ["he who pursues hatred does so for himself and he who pursues love does so for others. He who seeks revenge does so for himself and he who does good does so for others. And no one is ever so zealous as to benefit another as much as himself," *Zibaldone* 61].

[23] Levinas's 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-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).

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

30 Oct. 1821).[25] The Levinasian ethical relation thus establishes subjectivity in both Leopardi and Beckett.

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 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, and potentially also threatening (*TI* 42-3). Contrary to the long lineage from Leopardi to Lacan whereby desire is primarily characterized by lack, for 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 Infinity* 34).[26] 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.[27] Drawing on Platonic doctrine, in particular the form of the Good (see 1.1), and in a reaction to Enlightenment thought, Levinas abandons the

[25] "[a]ctivates the mind, communicates a certain inner activity to it, *jolts* it, etc., exercises it from a distance, etc. and it seems to return stronger and more exercised, etc" (*Zibaldone* 888).

[26] 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).

[27] As explained in 2.4, 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 Levinas understands it opens up to infinity. The discovery of the "otherwise than being" is what enables the emergence out of the *Il y a* (see 2.4). 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).

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" (*TI* 109).[28] The Levinasian notion of 'otherwise than being' is an echo of Leopardian compassion, which implies identification with the suffering subject. The state of being a hostage requires always having one more degree of responsibility, "the responsibility for the responsibility of the other" (*TI* 109).[29]

The Levinasian subject that emerges from the later work is not only 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 him/her. The Levinasian subject puts the "Saying" over and beyond the "Said" (*Otherwise than Being* 47). This Levinasian desire of the absolutely Other is not, in the ordinary sense, gratifying or desirable, but is defined by its pure, bruising strangeness.

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 centrifugal movement in Levinasian desire, however, deepens its intensity and in rupturing the being it does not bring about disintegration but, on the contrary, it inspires the being.[30]

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" (*Zibaldone*

[28] "dis-interested," says Levinas, means "disengaged from all participation" (*TI* 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).

[29] Levinas is adamant that the encounter with the Other is primarily "pure communication as the communication of communication" (*The Face of the Other and the Trace of God* 99).

[30] When speaking about the notion of artwork in Levinas, H.C. Hutchens 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).

3497,1; 23 Sept. 1823).[31] It is thus a corporal desire that is forever scarred by its impossible search for happiness (see 1.2.1).[32] Leopardi proposes desire for the other person 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" (*Zibaldone* 104,1; 20 Jan. 1820).[33] 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" (*Zibaldo-*

[31] "The happiness which man naturally desires is a temporal happiness, a material happiness" (*Zibaldone* 1430). In *Zibaldone* 3497, 1 (23 Sept. 1823) Leopardi continues to say: "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" ["Man does not desire happiness absolutely, but human happiness […]. He desires it to be supreme and infinite, but of his own kind, not infinite in the sense that it should also include the happiness of the ox, the plant, the Angel, and all other kinds of happiness one by one. Only God's happiness is truly infinite. Regarding infinity, man does desire a happiness that is divine, but regarding the other qualities and what type that happiness is, man could never truly desire the happiness of God," *Zibaldone* 1430]. The implication here is that desire for the infinite, as in Levinas, has to pass through the difficult desire for the finite.

[32] 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 mentioned above, prefigure Freudian thought. Leopardi will prefigure Freud in arguing, in the posthumously collected volume of indices from the *Zibaldone* titled *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 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 attempts of the modern being towards rationalization. For resonance between Leopardi and Nietzsche see M.A. Rigoni, *Saggi sul pensiero leopardiano*,78. See also the introduction of C. Galimberti, *Intorno a Leopardi*.

[33] "Once heroism has vanished from the world and given way to universal egoism, true friendship, capable of leading one friend to sacrifice himself for the other, among people who still have other interests and desires, is extremely hard" (*Zibaldone* 94).

ne 230,1; 4 Sept. 1820).[34] In 3118 (5-11 August 1823) 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."[35] Only sensitive beings are thus capable of desiring the other and showing compassion for the neighbour-as-stranger.

Like Levinas, then, Leopardi construes magnanimity in the act of being compassionate towards a hostile and threatening other.[36] The Leopardian search for the infinite intuited within the finite (see 1.2.1) approaches a similar notion proposed by Levinas. However, the Levinasian search for the Infinite is redirected towards the other person, because 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*.[37] I then proceed to an analysis of the

[34] "You might infer from this that man is intended to live in society. But I would say instead that this inclination or desire, while it seems natural, is an effect of society" (*Zibaldone* 164).

[35] "Thus it is that in modern and civilized times too, compassion is typical only of minds that are cultured or naturally delicate and sensitive, that is, that are sensitive and keen" (*Zibaldone* 1283).

[36] 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 (17 Sept. 1821) 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 etc." ["it is certain, especially today, that great and beautiful illusions are nowhere to be found, that friendship is easier between an old or mature man and a youth, than between youth and youth, between two old people than between two youths. For today, when illusions have disappeared, and virtue is no longer found in the young, the old are more ready to love themselves less, to tire of egoism because they are disenchanted with the *world*, and hence to love others," *Zibaldone* 786].

[37] Indices from the *Zibaldone* posthumously collected as *Trattato delle passioni* can be located in between other collections of *Zibaldone* indices titled *Manuale di filosofia pratica* and *Memorie della mia vita*. It is important to point out that these are not treatises as such, but collections of excerpts from *Zibaldone* published in a special edition of this work. In these excerpts there is a Levinasian tension between a claim for totality and the search for infinity. This totality might be imagined to correspond to the eighteenth-century encyclopedic goal, as do Leopardi's philo-

above-mentioned poems and argue 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 a Levinasian being-for-the-Other in the final poem, "La ginestra."

Compassion is here understood according to its Latin etymological roots *cum* [with] and *pati* [suffer or bear], which imply, 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-Other which is strictly connected to desire and *amor proprio*. Self-love taken to an extreme, on the other hand, prevents the human being from being capable of compassion and freezes him in the Rousseauite *mauvaise honte*. 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.[38] To the latter Leopardi annexes the analysis of "timore" ([fear]; 458, 1; 24 Dec. 1820). Desire here assumes "[i]l coraggio di sostenere la privazione di ogni speranza" and "mirare intrepidamente il deserto della vita" ("Dialogo di Tristano e un amico" in *Operette Morali* 488-89).[39]

logical 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 in which 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.

[38] One of the Romantic images attributed to Leopardi is that of the artist as isolated, lonely, different, and other. From Byron to Baudelaire and from Coleridge to Nietzsche, this is a cultural trope which many literary figures and fictional characters helped to create. 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, and emphasizes virility, pride, and sovereignty. He opposes this perception of solitude to the existentialist notion which perceives 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 he/she lacks (*Time and the Other* 55).

[39] "[t]he courage to endure the deprivation of all hope" and "to look intrepidly at the desert of life" (*OM* 488-89). It is in the same *Trattato delle passioni* that passions are portrayed as elusive to the tight hold of rationality and to the straitjacket 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*), where he speaks about the ne-

But compassion in Leopardi is counterpoised to *mauvaise honte* and to *atarassia* (see 2.2.), which in *Zibaldone* 65,1 (8 Jan. 1820) is still suggested as the remedy to human misery. In 196,1 (4-9 August 1820), 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'" (*Zibaldone* 519,1; 17 Jan. 1821).[40] Leopardi also points out that being amiable evokes compassion (*Zibaldone* 220, 3; 21 August 1820), where 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 arises at the sight of the weak who, however, are callous and insufferable: "[l]a compassionevolezza natural ai forti, e la natural immisericordia e durezza dei deboli" (*Zibaldone* 3271, 1; 26 Aug. 1823).[41] Compassion here implies 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" (*Zibaldone* 940, 2; 13 April 1821).[42] In *Trattato delle passioni* and *Manuale di filosofia pratica* Leopardi specifically focuses on the other as a weak subject (*Zibaldone* 281, 1; 17 Oct. 1820). He argues that compassion "[n]asce 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" (*Zibaldone* 108, 1; 30 April 1820).[43]

Nonetheless, given that all the Leopardian passions derive from *amor proprio*, compassion is not entirely free of egoism. Although he does contradict this notion on various occasions, he also considers the act of

cessity of Stoic philosophy (see 2.2.). 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 overall 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 model of the subject's being-for-the-other (1.5).

[40] "seeing to the preservation of *all that is good*" (*Zibaldone* 285).

[41] "[t]he habit of feeling compassion...the inclination to charity are always in direct proportion to the strength, good fortune, and lack of (or minimal) need that an individual has of action and help from others, and in inverse proportion to weakness, unhappiness, experience of misfortunes or ills." (*Zibaldone* 1342)

[42] "To suffer with patience and magnanimity is a sure indication of courage and a sublime soul, and to abuse one's own strength is a sign of craven ferocity." (*Zibaldone* 444)

[43] "[t]he compassion that arises in our soul at the sight of someone suffering is a miracle of nature that at that moment makes us feel something truly independent of our own advantage or pleasure and completely concerned with the other person, without any involvement of ourselves." (*Zibaldone* 97)

compassion as "atto d'orgoglio che l'uomo fa tra se stesso" (3107, 1; 5-11 August 1823).[44] Compassion is thus not always linked to *pietas*. Compassion results out of an act of pride while being simultaneously and inextricably linked to "speranza" [hope]. As Leopardi explicitly states: "[c]hi 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" (*Zibaldone* 1589, 1; 30 Aug. 1821).[45] Compassion in Leopardi is thus both an egoistic as well as an ultra-altruistic feeling.

Compassion 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. Severed from its Christian connotation, Leopardian compassion guarantees the involvement that, for instance, Stoic philosophy negates (see 2.2.1).[46] In *Trattato delle passioni* Leopardi launches a veritable attack against the indifference and ataraxia recommended by Epitectus in the presence of others' suffering (see 2.3),

[44] "Man, in experiencing compassion, becomes proud and takes pleasure in himself" (*Zibaldone* 1280). 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" (*Zibaldone* 108,1; 30 April 1820) ["compassion, which I say is the only human quality or passion that has nothing to do with self-love." (*Zibaldone* 97). In 3271, 1; 26-27 Aug. 1823 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 man is in a state of being the object of compassion, or of desiring or requiring it, even wrongly, and the more he persuades himself that he is deserving of it, the less he himself feels compassion," *Zibaldone* 1342].

[45] "Someone who has lost all hope of ever being happy cannot think about the happiness of others, because man can only seek it in relation to his own. He cannot therefore even take an interest in the unhappiness of others" (*Zibaldone* 735). Antiquity and childhood constitute natural states of being where passions are at their most intense. In these states of being the individual is closer to the unconscious and farthest from rationality. The nexus between the above-mentioned "speranza" (hope), and "timore" (fear), is strongest in the people of Antiquity and in childhood (*Zibaldone* 458,1; 27 Dec. 1820). Descartes and Spinoza deal at length with this same nexus. In Leopardi this link is found in the desire to desire life and thus in the desire for illusions (*Zibaldone* 66, 2; 8 Jan. 1820). 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 (22 June 1820), Leopardi describes the dearth of "Vigore corporale" that characterizes the modern human being. This dearth impedes action and thus moral involvement in praxis, which provokes what he conceives at this point (in June 1820) as the coring out of all virility in the modern human being. On 19 January 1828 Leopardi explicitly links desire to hope as he had done on 15 April 1820 (*Zibaldone* 105-108).

[46] 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.

an indifference which he dubs "irriflessione bestiale" (*Zibaldone* 196, 1; 4 Aug. 1820).[47] Leopardi, like Schopenhauer and Levinas, affirms the value and the necessity of participating in others' suffering.

Compassion for Leopardi is thus the sentiment that can counter the impenetrability of stultified social relations which put all faith in the aforementioned "ragionevolezza del secolo." Even as he underlines 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]; only compassion makes human suffering sufferable. To a degree, Leopardi imagines the role of the rejected individual in contemporary society as one that comes close to the sacrificial scapegoat who "suffers in order to relieve others from suffering" (Veronese 1000). Leopardi's conception is here proximate to the Levinasian notion of substitution. Compassion for Leopardi intensifies in proportion to 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.[48]

I now turn to Leopardi's later poetry in order to analyze the dichotomy between the Leopardian poetic 'I' and the Other. The poetic 'I' is a Lacanian torn subject endlessly longing for an impossible desire. This poetic voice, however, also possesses a fighting spirit for life which, by the time the reader gets to "La ginestra," becomes a subject ruptured as a being-for-the-Other. This poetic 'I' is capable of unique compassion. The verbal symbolization of the poetic 'I' 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 the final poem "La ginestra" becomes the capacity to be uniquely compassionate towards the other. The poems I 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."

Through compassion the isolated and solitary Leopardian voices, particularly in the last poem "La ginestra," become poetic voices for the other. 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. In the light of this aesthetic purpose in Leopardi, I shall first examine the desire entangled at the core of a struggle to articulate life in the mostly post-1828

[47] "bestial mindlessness" (*Zibaldone* 146).

[48] Torquato Tasso (March 11, 1544 – April 25, 1595) was an Italian poet of the sixteenth century, best known for his poem "La Gerusalemme liberata" (1580).

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.

The infinite movement of desire is already present in "Alla sua donna" (1823), which sounds out Leopardi's newfound poetic voice and evokes something within the human that recalls the Levinasian desire for 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 through 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.[49] In "Alla sua donna," the desire of the infinite intuited through the female – "Se dell'eterne idee / L'una sei tu, cui di sensibil forma / Sdegni l'eterno senno esser vestita"[50] – 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). The poetic 'I''s longing for the other is as strongly felt as the lack of its reciprocation is suffered.

Fernando Figurelli similarly points to "Il Passero solitario" 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). 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 in other poems written by Leopardi at this time, is imbued both by loss and renunciation: – "la beata gioventù vien meno" ["blessed youth is failing, too"] (line 44 in *Canti* 103) – and by 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]. Once again the feeling of desire is bittersweet in that the pleasure of longing is strikingly counterpoised by the pain of not having one's desire corresponded.

In "Il Risorgimento" (1828) an equally bellicose poetic voice, the "virtù nova" ["new power"] (line 83), fights against the decimation of desire, "duro mio sopor" ["my cruel sleep"] (line 64), and the ending of sentiment: "Il

[49] 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.

[50] "Whether you are the one and only / eternal idea that eternal wisdom / disdains to see arrayed in sensible form"; lines 45-47.

cor non mi feri" [he couldn't break into my heart] (line 48). The split poetic voice recalls the Lacanian subject split into "*je*" and "*moi*," which revisits the paradoxically infinite nature of human desire. The struggle is between the unconscious subject, addressed by the poetic voice, and the conscious subject: the poetic 'I' itself. The former comes close to asserting an impossible demand for entropy. The poetic 'I' affirms: "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). Desire and the urge to suppress it permeate Leopardi's poems written at this time.

In "A Silvia" the interminable movement of desire is, once more, woven through the poem. This is one of many poems that clearly reveal the inadequacy of attributing to Leopardi a nihilist title in order to capture the sentiment of his poetry. In "A Silvia" the longing for a perfectly blissful past, "rimembri ancora" ["do you remember still"]; (line 1), is idealized in the use of the superlative to express the past: "Quando beltà splendea negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi" ["when beauty shimmered / in your smiling, startled eyes"); lines 3-4). In the *Zibaldone* Leopardi explains that 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" (1044, 2; 13 May 1821, see 1.2.1).[51] 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" [laboured pages]; (line 16), the idealization of which has been sustained through mere illusions. However, the split poetic 'I' is caught in an infi-

[51] "[i]t is much sweeter to remember a good (one never experienced, but that when far away seems to have been experienced) than to enjoy it" (*Zibaldone* 496).

nitely 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. The poetic 'I' repeatedly casts a dark shadow 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 line which Beckett echoes, "dolorosamente / alla fioca lucerna poetando" ["miserably / writing poetry by my faint lantern"]; (114-5).[52] 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 strident 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: "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 to 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 passage 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

[52] 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].

from grasping the 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 "frale" ["frail"] (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 di Aspasia*, primarily in the poems "Il Pensiero dominante," "Amore e morte," "A se stesso," and "Aspasia."

In "Il Pensiero dominante" the 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 fictitiousness 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 that 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). This desire 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," the poetic voice presents the desire for love at a 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 by being reduced to mechanical actions. 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 later argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and as Lacan subsequently elaborates in his distinction between demand and desire. The desire for death in this poem almost prefigures the Lacanian *moi*'s desire for fusion manifesting itself in an underlying death wish that remains unfulfilled. Desire for death in "Amore e morte" not only reflects 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 poem that 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. As Perella points out, nothing in the *Canti* is as starkly desolate as the epitaphic "A se stesso," in which Leopardi, announcing the death of hope and desire, commands his heart to stop beating (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 Hegelian 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, who in this case is 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 poetic 'I''s utterances, which oscillate between "io" ('I') and "noi" ('we'), attempt to eliminate the Other as it laments a desire that is no longer. The presence of words here, as in Freud's *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 effort of the poetic voice to come to terms with its own utterances, and consequently 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 control 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, hushed tones blend in with the harshness of a poetic voice that has turned dour and cynical in an effort to

totally eliminate the Other as revealed through its 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 è il mondo" ["Life is only / bitterness and boredom, and the world is filth"]; (lines 9-10). Thus, on the one hand, the poetic 'I' unremittingly fails 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, the mind is bound to move in a repetitious cycle that keeps 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. Desire is insatiable; desire is an act of seeking without finding that both underlines and undermines it. The "inganno estremo" will never cease haunting, and this is also the case in "Aspasia."

In "Aspasia" the bitter and not entirely graspable memories of the Other lacerate the poetic voice. The evanescent image of Aspasia constantly invades the present: "Al dì sereno, alle tacenti stelle" ["on a clear day, / under the silent stars"]; (line 5). Memories of Aspasia crowd the voice's consciousness and render frustrated desire ineffable. Indeed in the poem "Aspasia" words are 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 is an "eccelsa imago" ["high ideal"]; (line 48) who, unlike in "Alla sua donna," is a source of frustration for the poetic voice that has to come to terms with its material fiction. The desire for unification with the "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 "Aspasia," although it describes itself as "neghittoso" ["deprived of desire"], the poetic voice releases its deep-seated and thwarted desire for life in a Leopardian smile that admits the insignificance of human life while it concomitantly braces itself to face it. The Leopardian smile is dianoetic in its capacity for compassion towards human frailty.

The theme of compassionate desire for the other becomes central in "La ginestra" (1836), particularly in the famous third 'solidarity stanza'[53]

[53] See Williams, "Leopardi's Philosophy of Consolation in 'La ginestra,'" 985-96.

which has been the focus of critical debate since the studies published in 1947 by Walter Binni and Cesare Luporini. If Leopardi's early poetry concerns the ideal (these poems are referred to as 'idilli'), the late poetry is stark and abrasive. 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 finds its apotheosis in "La ginestra" (163). Binni locates a moral and heroic commitment, a social message, in this 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 attenuating the selfishness of the individual. This type of criticism has been very popular with Marxist critics. Timpanaro, in "Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi," attempts 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 stance 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,[54] I am here proposing a Levinasian reading to shed light on the notion of the desire of the other person conceived in compassion towards the other, which Leopardi theorizes at length in the *Zibaldone* excerpts posthumously collected in a volume titled *Trattato delle passioni*.[55]

[54] 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 Lischi, 1969; Alfredo Bonadeo, "Dalle *Operette Morali* alla ginestra: desiderio, felicità 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).

[55] 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).

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 construe the compassion towards the other in "La ginestra" as Levinasian in the way it redirects towards the other person the 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 the human being'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).

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 così 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" ["fierce satisfaction"] 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.
>
> 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. (*Operette morali* 488-89)

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 the infinite power of Vesuvius prompts the poetic 'I''s 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 for this Infinity that is redirected in compassion towards the other person. In Levinas compassion ultimately indicates the human inability to directly reach 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 poetic voice's suggestion in "La ginestra" 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 reduce 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 for the futility, albeit the necessary futility, of the desire for life itself.

The Biblical epigraph, "E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce," refers to a life without desire for illusions and without reference to anything that goes beyond the material and tangible. The life without desire for illusions was largely made possible during the Enlightenment. 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. He implies that human beings have painted themselves into a corner by resorting to rationality at all costs. Leopardi's opposition to such excessive concentration on rationality and pragmatism, as is also the case with his disagreement with another theory of normative ethics

popular in 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's 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 anticipates the Levinasian notion of substitution.

The capacity to suffer and to guard oneself and others from suffering already interests Leopardi in his translation of *Manuale di Epitteto*. "La ginestra" is, to a degree, an extension of that endeavour in a social context. Rather than focusing on the ablation of desire, however, "La ginestra" shifts the emphasis onto the capacity to feel pain, and the poetic 'I' highlights less the desire not to suffer than the desire to shoulder 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). In "La ginestra" the poetic 'I' invites the individual to desire community and to specifically address the Other through "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 social relation, one's subjectivity is formed.

The poetic voice in "La ginestra" proposes a special conception of social alliance,[56] a communally agreed upon form of resistance also reinforced through the communicative value of conversation. As in the Levinasian notion of "Saying," individuals are conceived as bound together before

[56] 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 "Materialismo e progressismo," Biral highlights the blind mechanism of permanence in nature and the human consciousness of a kind of superiority over such permanence. Biral reads this existential self-awareness as a premise for a political opening (157). A year later Biral wrote "Considerazioni sul messaggio leopardiano," in which the word "political" has completely disappeared. The message of "La ginestra" is now, for him, that the 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," explores 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.

any social or political ties.[57] 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. In Leopardi, however, the distinction from Levinasian thought is striking in that the coming together of individuals is grounded in the recognition that the infinitely omnipotent universe is the common enemy of 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 self-love towards mutual compassion. The Leopardian ethics in this poem prefigures the Levinasian one in its 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 the other causes suffering as a "gratuitous addition" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 77).[58] 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: "gli odii e l'ire/ Fraterne, ancor piu' gravi d'ogni altro danno" ["his brother's hate or anger, / worse than any evil"]; (lines 119-21). Nonetheless, in "La ginestra" Leopardi is not attempting to profess universal love as the solution to all human malaise. A deep love for humanity is echoed in the poem, which reverberates with a profound re-

[57] 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 as developed by Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, human beings give power to a sovereign because of their fear of living with each other in a state of nature where chaos reigns supreme. Leopardi's desire of the good-of-the-other is, as in Hobbes, rooted in *amor proprio*. The question of 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 act on the basis of an innate benevolence that provides the rudimentary framework on which morality depends (*The Cambridge Companion to Hume* 162).

[58] 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).

gard for the very difficult kind of desire that human beings need to sustain towards one another. Humanity's only consolation is solidarity towards other people's suffering in the face of our shared 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).[59]

The word "pietade" here reveals the need for compassion as *pietas* derived from the recognition of the suffering that 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*.

3.3 Lacanian and Levinasian Desire for the Other in Endgame

In Beckett's play *Endgame* compassion is crucial.[60] Clov and Hamm and, to some degree, Nell and Nagg are situated on the cusp between two movements of desire. They are torn by a Lacanian desire that perennially creates longing and inner disjunction. On the other hand, however, 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),[61] and where everything is

[59] 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.

[60] James Knowlson describes 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.

[61] 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*.

"corpsed" (106).[62] I argue that the desire that characterizes these personages is a far cry from that of the protagonist in Beckett's early work *Proust*, whose main aspiration is to become indifferent to desire. 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. This paradoxically accentuates that same Lacanian gap "through which neurosis recreates a harmony with a real" (*Seminar XI* 22), that piece of the past which has been foreclosed and is now displaced onto language. 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).

I will examine Clov's relation to Hamm and Nell's rapport with Nagg within the context of Lacan's theory of interminable desire. The first lines of the play reveal the paradoxical nature of desire. Clov says, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished," which keeps being countered by the sudden "heap, a little heap, the impossible heap" (*CDW* 92). The first phrase can be associated with Clov and Nell's desire to cancel their identity whereas the second refers to their inability to escape 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). Pol Popovic Karic construes

[62] While the external world in "La ginestra" is clearly located in the Neapolitan setting of "sterminator Vesevo" ("Vesuvius the exterminator"), the first thirty years of Beckett scholarship repeatedly claimed that Beckett's "imagination functions almost entirely outside of history [and geography]: 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" (*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, following the traces by which Beckett "simultaneously refers and resists reference" to historical events ("Samuel Beckett," 162).

the dual movement of cancellation and assertion of identities through Clov and Hamm: "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).

This interminable cycle of desire reflects Clov and Hamm's and Nell and Nagg's traumatic existence. Their trauma is constituted by what they choose to conceive as a mythical past that they seem 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 that manifests 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, thus reflects their apparent failure to withdraw from the lifelong pain of "this farce, day after day" (*CDW* 99). Furthermore, when pressed to its furthest limits of expression, their speech encounters its own insufficiency. The omnipotence and impotence of speech overrule the speaker and the tormenting effects produced by language 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*, Clov 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).[63] The Shakespearean quotations in this text, as will also be the case in *Happy Days*, once more highlight loss because they float like the debris of a devastated literary tradition.[64] The play is in part characterized by this very failure of language, particularly speech, the impossibility of totally articulating thought and conveying meaning, and 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*]

[63] Jennifer Jeffers observes 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).

[64] 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." Ruby Cohn quickly followed Browne's lead in her seminal 1965 essay "The Tempest in an *Endgame*."

HAMM: You're a bit of all right, aren't you?
CLOV: A smithereen.
[*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 in 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.[65] 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 death is palpable: "I see my light dying" (98). When Nagg says that he lost his tooth the day before, all Nell can respond, with a repeated sigh of 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 *Proust*, that time is not just spent but 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). Time is slowly spending the characters in *Endgame*.

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 presents itself in analysis as an aggressive intention and as an image of corporal dislocation" ("Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis"; *Écrits* 84).[66]

The trauma of these characters, however, is not just the trauma of a futile desire for the Other. It is also constituted by the trauma of accusation (see 1.5.7), the trace of which also lies in the characters' speech, hint-

[65] Jeffers describes the impossible return to the past in the 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).

[66] 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).

ing at the bond with an immemorial past. Clov, Nell, and, as discussed in 3.4, also Winnie, are all vulnerably exposed to the bruising proximity of the Other, to the passivity of the accusative form which ruptures their subjectivity and throws into question all affirmation for-oneself, forcing them to shoulder responsibility in addressing the Other. I argue below that they are all uniquely elected – a unique position which is neither assumed nor 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 view Clov, Nell, and also Winnie, as ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded. In the trauma of persecution, they pass from outrage to 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).[67] This transfer is subjectivity itself, which could be equated to the Levinasian "Saying" proper to responsibility.[68]

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).[69] 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 attempts to look out of the window, the telescope scene, the references to dreams, forests, hills, woods, the sky, and 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

[67] 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).

[68] 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.

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

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 audience's imagination adrift.[70] The poetry of this drama questions and disturbs the *hic et nunc* 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" (qtd. in Knowlson, *Damned* 427). Thus the "vicinity" (97) of the world of *Endgame* is placed outside the world of nature and beyond its objective temporality to such an extent that scenes like the sails of the herring fleet appear to the perceiver as having been brought to a standstill, to "ashes" (113).[71] The world of *Endgame*, as Gary Adelman points out, "negates time itself" (*Naming Beckett's Unnamable* 108), and Hamm echoes this sentiment in his interjection, "moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (*CDW* 133). Above all, the final unexpected appearance of a little boy, an episode I deal with below, conveys a sense of an inexplicable Infinite where linear temporality has been suspended.

Although the inexplicable "infinity" beyond in *Endgame* can be neither rigorously described nor fully imagined, it pervades the background of Beckett's play. References to it are peppered throughout Clov and Hamm's speech. Their dialogue plays an important part in binding characters to one another; indeed, there is perhaps more to Clov's somewhat mocking statement that "something is taking its course" (98).[72] 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). However, the reference to an afterlife does not mean that the sense of the "infinite" in *Endgame*

[70] 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).

[71] 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." *Samuel Beckett's Endgame,* 85.

[72] 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." *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, 109.

is further from everything that appears, or is present in absence or shown by a symbol. In *Endgame* the infinite is poignantly felt in the refusal of the characters to allow anyone to tame or domesticate them by a theme. In sum, their "Saying" (see 1.5.5) lies in their proximity to the Other: an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment and opening onto the Infinite.

Levinas's "infinity" (and "totality") can thus be understood, at least initially, alongside Clov and Hamm's worldviews. Hamm's position, "bang in the centre" (105), reveals his attempt to reduce Clov, and also Nagg and Nell, to Levinasian "same [ness]," thus ignoring their otherness. Hamm's presence is, from beginning to end, accusatory 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-centered totalizing thinking, as well as his constant accusations of Clov (and also of his father – "Accursed progenitor!" and "accursed fornicator" [96] – and 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). Everything indicates that Hamm has abused his power in an attempt to annihilate those around him.

In Hamm's initial attempt to represent the other person, then, the 'I' dominates the other by attempting to capture the Other in a concept that reduces him/her 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" (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" (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 help 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 deficit to himself is brought about by the moral obligation imposed through Hamm's appeal; as a result Clov's being is disinterested, in that it is driven from the outside into itself, but into 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 less 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 I call below a Levinasian transcendence encountered at the very core of its subjectivity. Hamm throws Clov back upon himself in asking him to answer not just for him but also in his place. Clov and Hamm's encounter is indeed a primordial encounter which obliges them to just be for the other person. As the play progresses, Clov's desire for Hamm, as well as 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 and become 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 is wounded by Hamm, but this pain still results in Clov'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 about 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 stasis pertains less to the present than to the insurmountable diachrony of time. Clov's subjectivity subjected to Hamm is irrevokable.

Clov's words to Hamm do not ultimately put forth his presence, but they expose his vulnerability to the latter. Clov's final choice not to leave is the equivalent of the Biblical Abraham's "Here I am," which I 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).[73] The relationship with Hamm, incontestably set up in "Saying," is a responsibility for Clov without any limit or measure, an existence with sacrifice imposed on it.[74] Clov relates to Hamm like one who has just caught sight of an extreme passivity in one's relationship with an other.

Hamm's attempt at "totality" is thus increasingly called into question as the play unfolds, and Clov's painfully endured coexistence with Hamm increasingly reveals itself incapable of shirking responsibility for the other. The forced coexistence endured by Clov, but also Nell, is irritating ("If I could kill him I'd die happy" 105), but none of them is absolved from responsibility for the Other. Clov subjects himself to Hamm,[75] and through

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

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

[75] 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).

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's concept of "infinity." He only gets as far as the threatening "I'll leave you" (96), and the reason that 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). This relationship is as essential to the two as 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 requires considerable suffering. However, as the play progresses, 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. His pleas, which might sound like provocations, are also means through which he seems to be testing Clov's loyalty towards him: "Will you not kiss me?" (*CDW* 125).[76] The importance of social unity, expressed 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).[77] Furthermore, Hamm adds a new humane dimension to their rapport when he ponders, again significantly in the 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).[78] Hamm and Clov are in a difficult but necessary relationship that defines each other's existence.

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 a narration of his story in which he emphasizes what he presents as the "help" he gave to Clov as a child in order for the latter to survive: "[i]n 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 calls his capacity for compassion. Hamm later accuses Clov

[76] Karic comments that Hamm subtly exerts emotional blackmail on Clov and "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).

[77] 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).

[78] 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).

of lack of pity, an accusation which resonantes 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: "[w]hom 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). The I-Other trap casts its imprisoning net across generations.

But Clov also unearths accusations regarding Hamm's past unethical behaviour. Foremost among these instances are the Mother Pegg episode and the scene where Clov weeps for a bicycle and crawls at Hamm's feet, only to be told "to get out to hell" (96). The most telling instance, however, is Hamm's 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 be responsible 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-defence, 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).[79] There is something which, as Beckett has said with reference to this

[79] In possibly the most famous essay on this play (first published in 1961 and then in 1969 in English), T.W. Adorno 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 reaches a conclusion with clear resonances of Levinasian thought. This particular excerpt relevantly echoes 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

play, "claws"[80] at the deepest levels of experience and intuition which are otherwise quite ineffable.[81] 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 *Time and the Other*, does not manage to provide escape from solitude. It is an instantaneous transcendence achieved through light. Levinas says, "[s]ubjectivity is itself the objectivity of light. Every object can be spoken of in terms of conscious-

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). 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 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 and 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 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).

[80] Beckett wrote of the play's power to "claw" in a letter to Alan Schneider, dated 21 June 1956. In M. Harmon, ed. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, 11.

[81] We cannot ignore the time-honoured criticism that sees this play 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.

ness – 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). This Levinasian line of argumentation can throw light on the Clov-Hamm rapport.

The transcendent bond between Clov and Hamm cannot be achieved in light as much as it cannot be rationally explained away. Hamm and Clov are confined within the walls on the stage and seem to have been bound together for time immemorial, 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 light. This lack of light resonates with meaning when read alongside Levinas's 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).[82] The word transcendent is thus here used to indicate 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 one 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, they are also revealed through it while having their subjectivity pierced by the other's accusation. Their 'I' not only does not forsake the other but substitutes itself for the other. Thus being is transcended. The presence of Hamm in front of Clov, Nagg in front of Nell, and even more Willie in the presence of Winnie (see 3.4) questions their world of things experienced (and 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).[83] As Hamm resignedly admits: "You're leaving me all the same"

[82] For Levinas, the elemental world, *apeiron*, which 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). And what he or she reveals is the face, the personal. Such revelation, particularly in Hamm's case, occurs for Clov through speech.

[83] 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).

(*CDW* 95). Clov answers that that would have been his very wish but he is powerless when confronted by the other's concerns. Clov is unable to quit, in spite of having perennially tried to do so. His passivity precedes all receptivity; it is transcendent:

> 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 of 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.

Thus, transcendence in this play cannot be achieved in seeing, grasping, or other modes of enjoyment, sensibility, and possession.[84] In hospitality,[85] however, 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, one can find an absolutely transcendent Desire of the Other. 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" (*Time and the Other* 82). In confronting Hamm, Clov reaches the limit of the possible in suffering and is 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). The Levinasian transcendent claims the "absolute exteriority of the metaphysical term" (*Totality and*

[84] 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).

[85] 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).

Infinity 35). The 'I' puts the other's concern first while respecting an otherness that is a reminder of one's guilt and fallibility. This altruistic act, 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). Following this line of thought in Levinas, I argue that responsibility for the other in Clov antecedes representation and uncovers suffering in the denudation of the face.

The face of the other becomes the other's concrete intervention in one's life. This intervention is not just material because the face marks, in Levinasian terms, what I earlier referred to as the failure of Western or traditional philosophy.[86] Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, the face dominates those beings and 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: "[t]he 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 suggested 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 evocative of this inexplicable trauma for Clov who is, on the one hand, palpably timorous of facing it, on the other, unable to evade it.[87] Throughout the play, Hamm insists that Clov looks into his scary eyes: "Did you ever see my eyes? […] Did you

[86] The Levinasian discussion of the face follows the description of the confrontation with the idea of death in *Time and the Other* (see 2.4). 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 2.4), 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).

[87] 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, *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, 177).

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 refusals, 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.[88] 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). Hamm's entreaty halts Clov and, following this physical confrontation, 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 consolidation between human beings which is, as it were, "prior to every question" (177).[89] 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 commences with the presence of the face, produces goodness. As in Levinas, I read the conversation between Clov and Hamm, and 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.[90] This encounter becomes morality itself. Prior to ev-

[88] As 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).

[89] 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).

[90] "Speech proceeds from absolute difference […] Absolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language" (*Totality and Infinity* 194-95). Levinas claims that "[s]peaking, rather than 'letting be,' solicits

erything 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.[91] They act out an obligation to the Other in what resembles the Levinasian ethic, antecedent to, but expressed in, language. Such obligation is perhaps the reason that, 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 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.[92] 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 what makes Clov persist in answering Hamm's provocations, and it is also what compels him to fixate on Hamm and not move until the last line of the play.[93]

Indeed in both the Clov-Hamm and Nell-Nagg rapports, "the language precisely maintains the other to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes […] their commerce […] is ethical" (*Totality and Infinity*

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.

[91] The for-the-Other arises in Clov, and 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).

[92] 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).

[93] The dialogue between Clov and Hamm, despite being pared down to a logical minimum, is what gives expression to their ethical bond which in itself antecedes language. My line of argumentation is thus contrary to the one proposed by Jonathan Boulter's 1998 essay on *Endgame*, in which "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).

73).[94] Clov's 'I' leaves its comfort zone to address 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, and in that aspiration lies Clov's subjectivity. Hamm to Clov, as also Nagg to Nell, conveys the same earthly bleakness that gives a foretaste of the otherness of death. Clov claims that "the whole place stinks of corpses" (114) while Nell keeps repeating her near- drowning experience: "[i]t 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.[95] Clov passively accepts Hamm's accusation. Through this passivity Clov can sense the desire for the infinite. This form of desire has to pass through the desire for the non-desirable, 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). In particular, Clov echoes Leopardi's sense of the finite self being overwhelmed when confronted by the sublimity of the infinite. The Leopardian echoes also resonate in the way that the other person elicits from within the individual the desire for the infinite ("Alla sua donna"; see 3.2). In the case of *Endgame*, the other person is clearly the demanding Hamm, while the one to intuit the infinite through the restricting circumstances imposed by the other is Clov.

Clov senses this infinite beyond and in answer to his own question, "What is there to keep me here?" (120), he replies that, at least ontologically, "There's nowhere else" (95). Clov desperately longs for new horizons that lie beyond the immediate confines of his surroundings. 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

[94] 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).

[95] 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).

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 the picture, he faces the intransigent reality in the hope of being turned (in Clov's case perhaps whistled to) in order to glimpse what lies on the other side. Hamm offers a brief view 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 both the irritating pompousness that he imposes on others and his own 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 the grasp and, as such, Clov can only approach this infinity by remaining at a distance and by not being indifferent.[96] In this way, Clov recognizes Hamm as master, who approaches "not from the outside but from above" (*TI* 171). The Other is a master who "does not conquer but teaches" (*TI* 171).[97] 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).[98] 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). 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*

[96] 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).

[97] "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.

[98] 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).

the Other 72).[99] Height also entails sensing the infinite through the finite, constituted by the painful passage about 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." ("An Approach to Endgame"in Chevigny, 71-81).

The telescope scene palpably conveys the sense of the Infinite where there is both a visual and an imaginative projection of what lies beyond. Clov's otherwise sarcastic "I see […] a multitude […] in transports […] of joy" (*CDW* 106) could be a poetic creation in that it is precisely the elaboration of a setting that is diametrically opposed to the finite one in which he lives. The play reaches a climax at the 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 wakens his thought out of self-sameness.[100] This scene is followed by Clov's profound speech, starting with "They said to me, That's love […]," where he clearly expounds the suffering of living alongside the bruising strangeness of a fellow human being.

The boy who appears out of nothing, seen through that telescope and who sits outside without being harmed 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).[101] Now it is Clov

[99] The facing of the Other is the coincidence 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). This relationship with the other is, in Levinas's 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).

[100] 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) (*Theatre of the Absurd* 70-72).

[101] The father-son relationship is constantly in the background of the play. We cannot forget that in Levinas's earlier works, the relationship with the Other is primarily focused on fecundity in the manner it can produce another Other. 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

the adult's turn to be inspired by Hamm's 'I,' who becomes a marker of finitude in the face of something more, the inability to contain the other: "[t]he 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" scene clearly contradicts several early critical studies which insisted that *Endgame* is a despairing study of despair. In one of these early studies, however, 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 to Hamm: "[…] here we're down in a hole […] But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green? Eh?" (12)

Unintentional references to a sense of the beyond in the background of the play can thus be found even in early critical receptions which placed most of their emphasis on despair and misery.[102]

The impossibly graspable Infinite, evoked through the intervention of Hamm, moulds Clov as an ethical subject capable of pity and compassion.[103] Towards the end of the play, Hamm calls Clov back three times, culminating in a grand finale in which Hamm reminds Clov of his responsibility for him and appeals 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 that echo Leopardi's *social catena*, implores: "Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbour as yourself! […] like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two,

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).

[102] 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, "[r]elega[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.

[103] Clov has been drawn into this face-to-face encounter and Hamm constrains him 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.

three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark" (125-6).[104] 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 in *Proust* – that is, a friendship situated "somewhere between fatigue and ennui" (*Proust* 63).

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."[105] 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 suggested above, is the idea that time cannot be reduced to a linear event; rather, a radical rethinking of the role of the past, particularly a past that echoes the Levinasian notion of an-archic past, is continually pressing on the ethical relations between characters. An-archy is the event that interrupts the ego in its solitude, "interrupting it, leaving it speechless. An-archy is persecution" (*Otherwise than Being* 101). Events in *Endgame* are "always 'already in the past'" (*Otherwise than Being* 100), and ethical action is required to shoulder responsibility for that past.

Thus, I read Hamm's final approach as an-archic in its call to responsibility and in its calling out 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 inapprehensibility of Hamm's otherness and the unsatisfiability of the moral exigency he presents. Clov shoulders the burden of Hamm's past and present suffering and in the end does not leave. Substitution, as I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter with reference to Leopardian compassion, involves not simply taking responsibility for the other person but taking on the responsibility of the other person.[106]

[104] 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).

[105] Clearly in this later work Levinas is at his most sophisticated when 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 move beyond phenomenology itself.

[106] 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

When Clov turns towards Hamm and looks fixedly at him, a final action that repeats the one with which the play opens, it is clear that the same inextricable bond that compelled Clov to serve 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, emphasis mine). 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.[107] Clov repeatedly questions his insistence on ethical behaviour in such dire and bleak circumstances, where Hamm's "Discard" constitutes the essence of relations. His is an intuition of the Infinite or, as Levinas puts it, the "idea of the Good in me" (*Of God who comes to mind* 23), which leaves its mark in the subject's depths and 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" (*Zibaldone* 3498,1; 23 Sept. 1823).[108] 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 a trace in that other.[109] This metaphysical element, which 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 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)

would have undergone starting from the normative […] Everything is from the start in the accusative" (*Otherwise than Being* 112).

[107] 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).

[108] "The man who envies […] is not , strictly speaking, ever touched by envy or desire for the immense and full happiness of God, save to the degree that it is immense, and even more to the degree that it is full and perfect" (*Zibaldone* 1430).

[109] Dirk Van Hulle points out that in early manuscripts which genetic research has identified as versions of *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.

The desire for the good beyond being is finally expressed in the fact that it is not simply Clov who is obliged to Hamm, or vice versa, but "It's [that] 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). Hamm awakens in Clov the desire for something that exceeds him, the "good beyond being." 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 recalling 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 which won't allow him to take the course of action that 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 that has revealed its compassionate side, which can offer that something that 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).

Hence, for the characters in *Endgame*, 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's term, the Other is a marvel (*TI* 292). This desire awakens the possibility of showing human love.[110] This is a love that does not degenerate into *Eros*. Levinas defines it as follows:

[110] In *Beckett: L'increvable désir* (1995) Alain Badiou specifically argues for the importance of love in Beckett's oeuvre. This short volume effectively summarizes ideas about Beckett's output which became popular towards the turn of the century. Badiou adds to the trajectory of criticism on Beckett which was 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 still the prevalent view that Beckett's later drama and fiction are increasingly concerned with 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 study, 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, and thus relationships with others. Badiou explicitly states that whereas the early prose works journey towards inner solitude, Beckett's shift to theatre marks a 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 monograph, 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

> 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)[111]

The critique of heroic or Western self-sufficiency is then built on a type of vulnerability and openness that, alongside any intent of undoing, struggles to bear witness to ethical engagement. It is a desire for the Infinite that nevertheless turns us away from the Infinite as an object of desire and moves us towards the undesirable: the other person. The rapport with 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 "[w]hy [do] I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?", Hamm's words evocatively convey 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).[112]

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, in Levinasian terms, a "being-for-the-Other." At first, Leopardian *noia*, or frustrated desire (discussed in 2.1), appears to fill the interstices of this play and indeed Winnie attempts to exploit it as much as she struggles

Levinas's notion of the desire of the Other as applicable to the desire of the Other in Beckett's plays, given that he was overtly, and I would say unfairly, ultra-critical of Levinas's philosophy.

[111] It is pertinent to note that in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas wishes to refrain 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).

[112] The play ends with Hamm putting a stauncher of blood (the handkerchief) over his face. The word "staunch" 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," are a command to his partner to stay.

against it.[113] Winnie's desire for the O/other can therefore be identified with a struggle in which there is, on the one hand, a 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 bear but knows she cannot, 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 unconscious forces as well as a desire that establishes her subjectivity as significant in her being-for-the-Other. As in the Lacanian 'I' and the Levinasian subject, each foundationally inscribed by the intervention of the other, Winnie struggles between two poles of the "self," both differently inscribed by the other. 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)

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 Cornell phrases it, mimicking 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 agree that Winnie's words indicate 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)

[113] 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 the "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 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). We sense her perceived vitality in her desperate conviction that, for all the bleakness and waste, "There always remains something […] Of everything […] Some remains" (161). Her desire for the Other, like her desire to communicate, is 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" (*CDW* 138), holds it up, and kisses it, even though, significantly, she never avails herself of its service.[114] Winnie juxtaposes 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), with repeated expressions of "Oh this is going to be another happy day" (142) and "that is what I find so wonderful" (143). The same seesawing is present in the stage directions, which frequently indicate "*happy expression*" followed by "*happy expression off.*"

Winnie's speech thus evokes her two-pronged desire that is both Lacanian and Levinisian. The first involves the desire, or anti-desire (see 1.4.2), to return to the state where neither desire nor language is possible any longer but where, as evoked in *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 is at its imaginary heart: pure fiction that can dissolve 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), which echoes the Lacanian encounter with the other that clearly marks an "antihumanist" reading of the creation of the 'I.' Creating herself in relation to the other, Winnie desperately attempts to keep her life pieced together. Her words reveal her longing to be the whole she is not, while those same fragmentary utterances reveal the violence of a displaced and frustrated desire. Winnie's articulations reveal disjointedness and brokenness that refer to her essentially broken self. There is, underneath her defensively chirpy prattle, a deeper

[114] 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. As suggested below, she also paradoxically recognizes, and through her desire attempts to override, her murderous instincts towards Willie.

tormented "self" in troubling discord. The play is full of indications that Winnie is a Lacanian breached subject.[115] Lacan's thoughts on the speaking subject are pertinent to Winnie's case:

> [i]t 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)[116]

Winnie assiduously struggles in her attempt to utter life through the flow of her non-stop utterances, which are manifestations of the infinite desire of the Other. But her speech is instigated and driven by that which she does not contain or comprehend but which exceeds her, such as the certainty and mystery of death, which is 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). Winnie is entirely constructed through her desire for the Other manifested in language.

Since the origin of Winnie's speech lies in a response to Willie's unsettling presence, it is Willie who generates Winnie's language and represents her Other. 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 repeat her words, which he reluctantly does by uttering, "fear no more" (148).[117] Throughout the play she strives

[115] 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*, 177.

[116] Lacan goes on to clarify the implication of this assertion, 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 sexualized identity comes first, the biological body onto which it is ascribed, second; the subject comes first, the self, second.

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

to achieve a face-to-face gaze with Willie 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, Willie, and tell me can you see me, do that for me" (149). This language is clearly directed at Willie and Winnie attempts to be implacable in accepting the uncomfortable 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 her up to the difficult Levinasian desire of the Other: "[w]hat 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 bravery, even nobility – the same magnanimity of which Leopardi spoke. 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 describes. Annamaria Cascetta reports how Giorgio Strehler's staging of *Happy Days* in the early eighties was nourished by a Leopardian reading of the play:

> Leopardi and Camus, 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).

At various points Winnie stops to check whether Willie is listening to her – "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 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).[118] The otherness here becomes interchangeable and Winnie emphasizes her otherness when seen from Willie's perspective.

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 for her "an-archical" and inescapable obligation to the other. As Boulter claims: "[a]t 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 led to this state of affairs. As in all of Beckett, however, reality on stage is a deceptive sea where the strangest of fish can swim. Winnie herself does not ask how she ended up there although she clearly knows that her situation is bizarre. She reports others' puzzlement at her sorry appearance and, 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). Her entrapment is constantly seen in relation to its consequences for Willie.

The opening to the desire of the Other, the intuition of the Infinite through the difficult and impoverished 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 as 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 individual's 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 2.4). Winnie strives to overcome the tragedy of solitude and material life. This striving almost echoes Levinas's dictum that "materiality and solitude go together. Solitude is […] the companion, so to speak, of an everyday existence haunted by matter" (*Time and the Other* 58).

Winnie initially seems to be an existent in solitude who recognizes material life in its triumph over the anonymity of existing. She also recognizes the tragic finality to which she is bound in this very freedom.

[118] As Levinas says in *Otherwise than Being* "the-one-for-the-other itself is the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives" (78).

Caught up from the waist down in a mound, she is abandoned and unformed. 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 say, 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 2.4).

Winnie is thus initially imprisoned by both matter and her Levinasian hypostasis. In *Time and the Other* Levinas states that, "[t]hough 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 of these trivial objects, totally and completely revealed under the "blaze of hellish light" (*CDW* 140), increasingly make Winnie confront the material she is accumulating around her. This confrontation is telling in view of Levinas's understanding of 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 treats Winnie's encountered things as if they were in a direct relation to her ego. Winnie becomes an existent in this subjective act.[119]

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 with specifically in terms of eros, voluptuosity, and fecundity. In my reading, Winnie's existence in relation to Willie unfolds according to a similar movement from initial hypostasis to "the absolutely other – [who] paralyzes possession" (*TI* 171).[120] Being-in-the-world evades the intimate self-enclosure of the Levinasian subject: "[o]ur existence in the world constitute[s]

[119] In *Proust* Beckett had expressed a similar sentiment when he defined "attainment" as "the identification of the subject with the object of his desire" (14).

[120] In *Time and the Other* Levinas notes 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).

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.[121]

I read in Winnie a progression toward a desire to break out of the circuits of sameness. Winnie attempts to satisfy this desire through the Levinasian "caress," despite being confronted by the failure of eros, voluptuosity, and fecundity.[122] In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas claims:

> 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)

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 conceived of as both the "feminine Other"[123] who attempts to escape presence, and as 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).[124] To recognize the Other is also to come to him across the world of possessed things.[125]

[121] 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, the Other evokes. 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.

[122] Levinas notes: "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).

[123] Levinas describes the feminine Other as follows: "the absolutely 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).

[124] 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).

[125] Winnie's desire for 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 partially relevant because, as in Lacan, it is here also construed as bound up with

Viewed from this angle, Winnie's desire of Willie is particularly challenging because it fails to accomplish the 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. As I argued in my analysis of *Endgame*, this does not simply entail the materiality of skin and facial features, although these are also not precluded from consideration. Levinas secondly proposes, first in *Time and the Other* and further in *Totality and Infinity*, that desire is associated with fecundity – which neatly ties in with eroticism.[126] In *Happy Days* both the face and fecundity are conspicuously absent. 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 unable to exist in relation with another Other, precisely because of her childlessness and senility.

Winnie initially appears as an object consumed by need, but by the end of the play she is still capable of a desire not based on need. The presence of Willie tears her away from solitude and throws her into contact with the Other. Contrary to the Sartrean look of alienation, Annamaria Cascetta proposes that "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. In fact, Winnie is not accomplished as a being in transcendence toward light, but as a being in modesty. Her transcendence consists in withdrawing into 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, "[w]ith 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). Thus, Winnie's attempt at "the caress" towards Willie occurs 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).[127] Indeed, Winnie

aggression, knowledge, and the 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.

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

[127] 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.

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 form of love and desire that is greatly superior to erotic love. In fact, the failure of Eros opens up the possibility of the universalization of the "an-archical" ethical.

The future of time (central to the idea of death), is at the very core of the notion of the erotic: "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 hinted in *Endgame*, the Other also evokes and intriguingly 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. Evoking the fearful otherness of death, the face of the Other is also the one who calls on the individual from high in *Totality and Infinity*. That face, like Willie's, is barely glimpsed but as in Levinasian height (see 1.5.2; 3.3), it forces one to show compassion.

Willie is both the frail, boyish other Winnie feels compelled to mother (as in Levinas, the for-the-other in vulnerability also refers to maternity in this play) – "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. Winnie's happiness depends on the 'height' implied by Willie's utterances: "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. In facing Willie, Winnie 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. She is asked to desire Willie in the radical passivity of the good will.[128]

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's later abstraction.

[128] I introduce the idea of radical passivity in the same spirit in which Levinas introduces it in *Time and the Other*. By the term superlative passivity, Levinas

"Goodness," affirms 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 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 remote and incomprehensible, a presence 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. 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, Willie confronts and disrupts Winnie's settled location

Entangled in Willie's presence, Winnie feels uneasy and guilty; her "self" is totally decentred as, by the second act, she has been sucked down into the mound up to her neck. Willie traumatizes and shakes her out of her absorption in the world of things. He has 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 measureless self-giving. It is what she conceives as Willie's infinity of demand that is crushing and burdensome, but also essential. The alterity of

means what is more passive than, or prior to, all the syntheses which have hitherto defined time, subjectivity, being, and truth for philosophy.

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 transcends the present toward the mystery of the future.

Winnie is thus as much a fractured Lacanian subject perpetually unable to coincide with herself as she is defined by her desire for the Other. Hers is a Levinasian desire lacking reciprocity and involving asymmetry and abjection, which is incomparably more taxing. Winnie perceived in light of Levinas's poignant words takes on a whole new dimension as a compassionate being-for-the-other: "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. This giving of oneself 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.

CONCLUSION

Following an exploration of the myriad facets of desire, from Leopardi's reflections on the subject to Beckett's exploration of the issue with reference to the Recanati poet, I have demonstrated that Beckett's reading of Leopardi on the question of desire merits further scrutiny. I examined the notion of desire that compelled one author to look back to 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 Beckett's texts sometimes mock). Beckett chooses to focus on the early, somewhat negative period of Leopardi's writings, and it is no wonder that these early phases of both authors' careers have instigated readings that emphasize pessimism and nihilism in their most acute expression. Beckett's reading of Leopardi apparently disregards how the Italian poet's thoughts on desire radically change a short time later and how Leopardi ultimately deems human desire and the illusions that come with it to be absolutely necessary.

A twist to my argument about Beckett's reading of Leopardi, however, is that desire 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 have shown how both writers came to view and project desire in their later work in an uncannily similar manner: an interesting occurrence, since they were initially 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 Recanati poet 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 (Leopardi) is capable of equal greatness to Dante, as Beckett indicates when he calls Leopardi a "sage" in the context of the ablation of desire.

Nonetheless, while the desire not to desire was a pivotal issue for Beckett in the early 1930s – as much as it was for Leopardi, particularly in the

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period that spanned 1819 to 1828 – desire continues to resurface for both authors. This is especially the case in *Endgame*, one of Beckett's first plays, and in later plays like *Happy Days*, and in Leopardi's last poem "La ginestra." That 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 both writers' oeuvres look increasingly tenuous.

I have shown that desire in Leopardi's and Beckett's work is characterized both by dearth and by an inability to come to terms with expression; this is 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 disappearance.

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 suggest (see 2.3). Nor is life simply Leopardian "*souffrance*" where Epictetian 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 the protagonist, Belacqua, after mocking nineteenth-century Italian 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 an oxymoronic statement about life: "it's a quick death, God help us all. It is *not*" (*More Pricks than Kicks* 19, emphasis mine).

Life is *not* a quick death. Towards the end of this story the line "Take into the air my quiet breath" (19) eerily echoes the opening line "or posa per sempre" in Leopardi's "A se stesso." What Beckett proposes here – stillness, which he had also 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 – is revealed to be impossible to attain. If these 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. 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 the ethical role of desire.

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 any attempt 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" represent the continuation of their desiring and suffering 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 union 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 the selected Beckett 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. Leopardi's and Beckett's texts transfigure this appeal to desire into poetic creation.

The desire intrinsic to human beings has to be accepted as a form of illusion, something that aids the human being to endure. Desire among human beings can never be neatly and harmoniously pigeon-holed or possessed. Friendship and ethicality in general cannot 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 conceding to the impossibility of totalizing desire, one can acknowledge one's impotence in its presence and derive strength out of it. I believe I have demonstrated in this study that the poetic voices and *dramatis personae* in the selected works of Leopardi and Beckett succeed in doing just that.

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