

INTRODUCTION

In noi di cari inganni | non che la speme, il
desiderio è spento¹

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 referred 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).

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.

