

BEFORE THE CURTAIN FALLS:
SAMUEL BECKETT AND E.M. CIORAN

by

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett and E.M. Cioran are two of the twentieth century's best-known pessimists. Yet few scholars outside of France are aware of the fact the two were friends for many years before going their separate ways. This thesis examined their friendship so as to clarify their political and philosophical agreements and disagreements. It did so primarily by consulting the two writers' correspondence and Cioran's journal entries. This research determined that Beckett and Cioran fell out as friends as a result of political differences that first became apparent in the mid-1970s. (The former became politically active in this decade and lost patience with the latter's resignation.) The main conclusions drawn from this study were that Beckett was politically progressive despite his pessimism and that Cioran was unable to re-engage with politics following his youthful nationalism.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jacob Joshua Friesen. Welcome to the world

INTRODUCTION

Modern pride: I have lost the friendship of a man I esteemed, having insistently reminded him I was more degenerate than he.

Cioran, *All Gall Is Divided*

This thesis has its origin in three sentences found in James Knowlson's magisterial biography of Beckett:

He [Beckett] always had rather fewer writers among his close friends than painters and musicians. This remained true at the end of the 1970s. [...] For some years, he had met, occasionally for dinner, the Romanian-born philosopher, E.M. Cioran, but was finding that he had less in common with Cioran in terms of outlook than he had at first thought. (*Fame* 654)

These sentences kindled my curiosity for two reasons. The first was that I did not know Beckett and Cioran had known each other (I admired both). The second was that Knowlson did not specify the nature of Beckett's disagreement with Cioran. I immediately felt this was a subject meriting investigation.¹

I discovered Cioran several years earlier reading Jean Baudrillard's *Cool Memories IV*. (I did not discover Beckett until some time later, when I picked up *Waiting for Godot* at a used bookstore.) Looking back, I am not surprised I learnt of Cioran by way of a French philosopher: Cioran is unknown in the English-speaking world, even among academics. Serbian poet Charles Simic began his 2010 piece on Cioran by asking:

¹ I e-mailed Knowlson, inquiring about this passage. He explained that a friend of Beckett's had relayed the information to him and that he did not recall Beckett speaking to him about Cioran.

Who reads E.M. Cioran nowadays? Someone must, since most of his books have been translated and are in print. At universities where graduate students and professors are familiar with every recent French philosopher and literary theorist, he's practically unknown, though he was a much finer thinker and wrote far better prose than a whole lot of them. (n. pag.)

As I became more familiar with Beckett and Cioran's lives, I perceived a number of parallels between them. John Pilling enumerated several of them in his essay "Two Versions of De-composition: Samuel Beckett and E.M. Cioran":

They were born within five years of each other (Beckett in 1906, Cioran in 1911) in countries that are normally thought of as outside the central European cultural tradition (Beckett in Ireland, Cioran in Romania), and both have chosen to express themselves creatively in the French language, thereby freeing themselves of something they had occasion to feel distaste for. (305)

Pilling goes on to note that the parallels "actually meet in 1937, the year they each, then of course unknown to each other, decided to live in Paris for good" (305). Later in the essay, he adds: "None of these parallels, fortuitous or otherwise, would matter very much if there were not a similarity in spirit between Beckett and Cioran" (307).

Pilling is not the sole writer to remark upon a "similarity in spirit." Critic William Kluback felt there was "a mysterious affinity between these men worthy of being explored" (226) while Anthony Cronin believed the two "had many things in common" (564). Given their biographical parallels and "mysterious affinity," I found it all the more strange Beckett should have found that "he had less in common with Cioran [...] than he had at first thought" (Knowlson, *Fame* 654).

When I began my research, I expected to find that other scholars had already resolved, or attempted to resolve, this puzzle. I was wrong. Apart from Pilling's essay, I found little scholarly writing on Beckett and Cioran's friendship in the English language. Turning to French, I located a few short articles, but none which considered the friendship in any depth. I was even more astonished when I discovered that Cioran had kept most of the letters Beckett sent him, that these letters were available to scholars at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris, and that no one, to the best of my knowledge, had made use of them in an academic study.

Personal interest aside, there is the question of why Beckett and Cioran's friendship matters. One justification might be that Cioran remains unfairly neglected by Anglophone academics; studying Cioran in relation to a well-known author like Beckett is one way to raise the former's profile. A more plausible justification, however, has to do with the philosophical turn in Beckett studies over the last ten years or so. Beginning with Richard Lane's *Beckett and Philosophy* (2002) and continuing through to Anthony Uhlmann's *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (2009), Beckett scholars have been reconsidering Beckett in relation to different schools of philosophy. But these studies, with one or two exceptions, have analyzed Beckett in relation to philosophers that had little or no influence on him. Cioran, in addition to being a close friend, was a philosopher Beckett admired. The fact they initially found they had much in common "in terms of outlook" (Knowlson, *Fame* 654) makes their friendship even more interesting from the point of view of clarifying Beckett's own philosophical outlook.²

² Pilling shared this view: "There is perhaps as much to be gained from contemplating why they have gone their separate ways as from considering why they are more like one another than one would normally expect a writer and a philosopher to be" (313).

The materials available for reconstructing Beckett and Cioran's friendship are plentiful: besides their correspondence (unfortunately, only two of Cioran's letters to Beckett have survived), we have numerous journal entries, anecdotes, interviews, and an essay Cioran wrote on Beckett for the *Partisan Review* in 1976. Concerning the two writers, Kluback wrote: "Nowhere else, except in invented figures of the past, do we find two writers so closely joined together. What a pleasure it would have been to listen in on their conversation!" (226). This thesis is an attempt to listen in on that conversation.

CHAPTER 1: 1930-1945

“How’s the world” he said nevertheless, in spite of everything, “and what’s the news of the great world?”

Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*

Although critics would later comment upon the Beckett and Cioran’s stylistic and philosophical similarities, it is doubtful anyone in 1937 would have registered them; the Second World War would need to occur before each writer developed his unique style and vision. Still, it is prudent to begin before the war in order to sketch their early political differences. These differences became obfuscated following the war when both men’s disillusionment with humanity led them to forego politics, at least for a time. It was during this period of disillusionment the two became friends. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the differences that would have been apparent prior to the war became apparent yet again and led to Beckett and Cioran’s estrangement. Thus, any consideration of their friendship must start prior to the war, when the two were not yet kindred spirits.

In 1936, Beckett finished the first version of *Murphy* was having considerable difficulty finding a publisher. His first biographer, Deirdre Bair, comments that *Murphy* was written “in a decade when social and political novels had so captured the public consciousness that to write anything as uncommitted as *Murphy* was automatically to invite rejection by most publishing houses” (211). Cioran, by contrast, had published a nationalist diatribe titled *The Transfiguration of Romania*. Genre aside, it is difficult to imagine two more different literary voices than the knowing sarcasm of *Murphy* and the frenzied intolerance of *The Transfiguration*.

Beckett scholar John Pilling remarks that Beckett and Cioran's parallels keep their proper distance after 1937 (306). In fact, the parallels diverge earlier than Pilling suggests. In 1933, the University of Berlin granted Cioran, already fluent in German, a scholarship. During his time in Berlin, Cioran published several articles praising the National Socialist movement and its leader, Adolf Hitler. In an article he wrote for *Vremea* in 1934, he declared, "There is no politician today who inspires me with a greater sympathy and admiration than Hitler" (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 240). According to Cioran, Hitler's merit consisted in "having stolen the critical spirit of a nation" (qtd. 241). What counted, he wrote, was "an infinite vibration of the soul, a will for absolute fulfillment in history, an intense exaltation bordering on the absurd, an irrational drive to sacrifice your life" (qtd. 241).

Cioran's praise of Hitler must be read in context. Cioran came to Berlin as a young man suffering from a severe identity crisis. This crisis revolved around a single question: "How can one be Romanian?" As Pilling notes, Beckett and Cioran both came from countries "normally thought of as outside the central European cultural tradition" (305), but the latter was far more troubled by his origins than the former. In the same article in which he praised Hitler, Cioran wondered whether small nations, like his own, could "make a leap forward without a dictatorship" (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 241). Given his intense insecurity as a Romanian, one may understand, although not excuse, Cioran's idolization of a leader who seemed to provide his nation with "a *destiny*" (qtd. 244).

Beckett did not share Cioran's nationalism. As Patrick Bixby has demonstrated, Beckett's first novel satirizes Irish republicanism by having Mr. Neary perform an

“awkward self-sacrifice” on the “alter of Irishness” in the General Post Office (Bixby 3).³ Beckett’s suspicion of nationalism had several foundations. In 1916, his father took him and his brother, Frank, to a hilltop where they saw smoke rising from Dublin following the Easter Uprising. Ireland was partitioned during his second year at Portora Royal School in the north of Ireland and each day he passed across the border, “seeing British troops stationed nearby, and then returning to the capital of a new country that was in the process of forming itself” (Knowlson, *Fame* 37). Decades later, in 1977, he lamented the fact Ireland was divided by warring nationalisms: “In Ireland there aren’t just two, but three, four, five kinds of fanaticism, all being torn apart by even more fanaticism” (qtd. in Juliet 34). For most of his life, then, Beckett regarded nationalism as the source of, rather than the solution to, Ireland’s problems.

By all accounts, Beckett was apolitical prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Peggy Guggenheim, an art collector with whom Beckett had a brief affair in 1937, recalled Beckett telling her he had “no time for politics” (Bair 275): “He said he accepted life fatalistically, and political activity, even discussion, was a waste of time” (275-276). Beckett’s German diaries, which he kept while travelling throughout the country in 1936, confirm Guggenheim’s recollections, containing little political commentary despite the dramatic changes that were underway in Germany at the time. Beckett scholar Jackie Blackman writes, “It ‘appears’ that while Beckett was aware of the restrictions placed on Jews at the time he perhaps did not yet realize the full implications nor did he ‘actively’ oppose anti-Semitism” (“Judaizing” 328). While Beckett may not have “actively opposed” German anti-Semitism, he did register it with disgust. Beckett sent a letter to

³ The statue depicts the mythic Irish hero Cuchulain and was built to commemorate the rebellion of 1916 when nationalist rebels declared Ireland’s independence from Britain.

Thomas McGreevy in 1937, for instance, in which he deplored “Jewbaiting Streicher & his rag” (*Letters 1929-1940* 461). Beckett was equally disdainful of the cult of personality surrounding Hitler. In a 1936 letter to Manning Howe, he complained, “All the lavatory men say Heil Hitler” (384). Although Beckett was not politically committed at this time, he was contemptuous of Nazi culture.

Beckett became more political upon settling in Paris in 1937. He re-established relations with Joyce and the two discussed the situation in Europe. Joyce, like Beckett, was contemptuous of Nazi ideology and mockingly referred to Germany as Hitlerland (Ellmann 722). Yet, despite his antipathy to National Socialism, Joyce sought to cultivate an image of detachment and occasionally praised Hitler’s Germany in order to provoke his friends. Beckett not see humour in the situation. He spoke to Joyce of the Nazis’ mistreatment of the Jews, but Joyce responded that there had been similar persecutions (Ellmann 722). On another occasion, Joyce demanded of Beckett, “What is the use of this war?” (741) By then, Beckett thought that war with Germany was inevitable. Decades later, he told Cioran that Joyce accepted everything with equanimity: “For him, *there was no difference between the fall of a bomb and the fall of a leaf*” (qtd. in *Anathemas* 133).

Following his time in Berlin, Cioran taught in Romania before accepting a scholarship from the French Institute of Bucharest in 1937; the scholarship was to be his sole means of support until 1944. He originally conceived of his thesis as an examination Nietzsche and Kierkegaard’s ideas of evil; his biographer, Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, points out, however, that “[a]s far as we know, he never wrote a word” (137). Instead, he enrolled at the Sorbonne in order to gain access to the student refectories and purchase

restaurant meals at a discount – “a lifestyle which he continued to follow for several years after the war was over” (137). He did not attend any courses.

Cioran’s time in Paris was not entirely unproductive. He became fluent in French and obtained a post as cultural attaché to the Romanian embassy in Paris. The director of the French Institute in Bucharest, whom Cioran described as “an enlightened man,” lied on the latter’s behalf so that Cioran did not have to worry about completing his thesis (137). The fall of France in June 1940 threw Cioran’s shiftless existence into disarray. In November, he returned to Romania where he delivered a radio speech celebrating Corneliu Codreanu, the leader of the reactionary Iron Guard. But Cioran’s speech was ill-timed: General Ion Antonescu, the head of the new government, outlawed the Legionary movement shortly thereafter and Cioran lost his diplomatic appointment as a result.

In June 1941 Romania joined the Axis and Cioran, stripped of his diplomatic post, found himself pursued by the Romanian military attaché who wished to enlist him. Cioran’s partner Simone Boué, whom Cioran met for the first time in 1942, remembered how Cioran “went everywhere with a packed suitcase, ready to decamp or go into hiding on a moment’s notice” (Boué 139).

Beckett’s role in the Resistance is well-known and need not be summarized here. For us, its significance lies in the fact it marks a transition from apolitical cynicism to political commitment. Terry Eagleton, in his essay “Political Beckett?”, remarks on the unlikelihood of “one of the twentieth century’s most apparently non-political artists secretly [taking] up arms against fascism” (67). While Eagleton’s description of Beckett as “a militant of the left” (69) is not entirely accurate, it does reflect an important truth about Beckett, namely, that he was more engaged than he presented himself as being.

Bair judges Beckett's wartime activities as being consistent his early apolitical stance since he claimed to be fighting against the Germans in order to protect his friends (Bair 308). Bair's judgment is premature: the friends in question, those Beckett claimed to be fighting for, were designated political enemies by the occupying forces on account of their ethnicity. Beckett acknowledged this in an interview with John Kobler, in which related being so outraged by the Nazis' treatment of Jews he could not remain inactive (Cronin 325).

Beckett's friend and biographer Anthony Cronin made a compelling observation regarding the political situation in France at the time of the German occupation:

The divisions in French society were deep and bitter and have lasted to this day. Most of those who called themselves 'patriots' were actually at this juncture for Vichy and even for 'the new order'. Nor was it true – or certainly not true until later – that all who were 'civilized' or even 'progressive' were on one side and everybody else on the other: in other words, it was not a question of intellectuals against everybody else. What did, however, even in these early days, divide one sort of person from another was the treatment of the Jews. (325)

If Cronin is correct then we have further grounds for concluding that Beckett's decision to join the Resistance was political. Beckett witnessed numerous arbitrary arrests and murders during the occupation (Bair 308), but he was particularly incensed by the deportation of Jewish friend Paul Léon (Blackman, "Post-war" 73). While Beckett may not have thought of himself as fighting for the French nation, he was certainly conscious of making a political statement by joining the Resistance. Far from being "consistent in

his apolitical behaviour” (Bair 308), Beckett was breaking with a history of resignation that stretched from his childhood and through his early adulthood.

In contrast to Beckett’s wartime activities, which have been meticulously documented by Knowlson and others, Cioran’s activities remain largely unknown. Zarifopol-Johnston speaks of 1937-45 as Cioran’s “lost years” (136), acknowledging that it is difficult “to find reliable records of private persons’ lives in Europe – in France, in Paris – during World War Two if they didn’t write about it themselves, and sometimes not even then” (136). We know, for instance, that Cioran regularly crossed paths with Sartre at the Café de Flore, although they never spoke (Bollon 22). Zarifopol-Johnston suggests that those wishing to know more about Cioran during this period instead “take the usual detour and look for him in his books – where, as he always insisted, in war or peace, we are more likely to find him anyway” (136). Particularly illuminating, from this point of view, is Cioran’s pre-war polemic *The Transfiguration of Romania*, which outlines his views on Jews and anti-Semitism.

At the time Cioran penned *The Transfiguration*, Romania’s Jewish community numbered 75,000 individuals and was the fourth largest in the world (Petreu 129). National minorities made up 28 percent of the country’s population and many belonged to nations that had once oppressed the Romanians (122). The Legion of the Archangel Michael blamed Romania’s minorities, the Jews in particular, for corrupting the nation’s democratic institutions and subverting the will of the people. Cioran held a number of beliefs in common with the Legion, not least the belief that Romania’s large Jewish community undermined the nation’s future. And yet, Cioran was also critical of some of

the anti-Semitic clichés advanced by the Legion, such as the idea that Jews were agents of international finance and Communism.

Upon finishing *The Transfiguration*, Cioran's mother is supposed to have said: "[I] cannot tell whether you are for or against the Jews" (qtd. in Petreu 135). Cioran's attitude towards the Jews was complex if not contradictory. He genuinely believed the Jews were a superior people. In *The Transfiguration*, he asks, "What can a telluric people do in front of the most cerebral of nations?" (qtd. in Petreu 128). Precisely for this reason, however, he feared Jews. On the subject of Romania's national minorities, he declared: "Neither the Hungarians nor the Saxons possess a political spirit superior to our own. That is why after the [Hungarian-Romanian] war [of 1919] only the Jews managed to get their hands on us" (qtd. 128). But while Cioran considered "the Jewish problem" to be "the curse of history" (qtd. 130), he did not outline a solution. Disturbingly, he did remark, "Germany has begun to terminate its particular part of the problem" (qtd. 130).

As outrageous as Cioran's comments are, they should not be taken literally. Extreme proclamations are a hallmark of Cioran's pre-war writing and, while odious, they are not malicious. Cioran's quarrel with the Jews stemmed from his frustration with Romania's failure to modernize and enter history. Throughout *The Transfiguration*, he emphasizes that the Jews are not Romania's principal problem:

Would Romania's existence have been any less miserable had no Jews been present here? To what extent would that have raised her historical level (the only one that counts)? Obviously, there would have been less corruption, but from there to history is still a long way. At worst, the Jews *postponed* Romania's

greatest hour; under no circumstances can they be seen as the cause of our misfortune, of our eternal misery. (qtd. in Petreu 123)

Moreover, Cioran criticized the preoccupation with Jews characteristic of Romanian nationalism: “The narrow vision of Romanian nationalism stems from its anti-Semitic origins” (qtd. 123). He also rejected simple xenophobic solutions to Romania’s problems: “*If we were to eliminate all foreigners, the situation of Romania would be no less dire*” (qtd. 123). These observations do not excuse Cioran’s views, but they do illustrate that he was critical of some of his fellow Legionnaires’ beliefs.

If Cronin is correct that one’s response to the mistreatment of Jews determined one’s attitude towards Vichy and the occupation then Beckett and Cioran’s different decisions become more intelligible: Cioran bore Jews no special hatred, but he did not feel particularly distressed by their plight either; Beckett, according to Knowlson, was “deeply and instinctively anti-racist” (*Images* 36) and so his decision to join the Resistance came naturally. But Nazi persecution moved Cioran to compassion on at least one occasion: When German authorities apprehended a Jewish friend, Benjamin Fondane, he intervened with two other friends and secured Fondane’s release. Tragically, the authorities did not release the Fondane’s sister and Fondane rejoined her in the prison convoy to Auschwitz, where he ultimately died (Zarifopol-Johnston 139).

The experience of living through war and occupation profoundly affected both writers in obvious as well as subtle ways: both found themselves bound to France and began to write exclusively in French, at least for a time; both, while far from optimistic to begin with, evinced a new pessimism regarding the fate of the West (in Cioran’s case) or

humanity (in Beckett's); lastly, both developed a loathing for all forms of fanaticism, a loathing that would bind the writers together following their first meeting in 1961.

CHAPTER 2: 1946-1960

Only the sceptics (or idlers or aesthetes) escape because they *propose* nothing, because they – humanity’s true benefactors – undermine fanaticism’s purposes, analyze its frenzy

– Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*

If the period prior to the war is important to study in order to gain a sense of Beckett and Cioran’s essential political differences, the period between the war’s end and their first meeting in 1961 is important to study because it corresponds to the authors’ period of maturation (in Beckett’s case) and re-invention (in Cioran’s). As we shall see, the trauma of war and occupation led both authors back to the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose bitter account of human existence resonated with the two more than ever after Europe’s recent bloodbath. Schopenhauer’s philosophy also provided an appealing alternative to the post-war consensus both would challenge.

Immediately after the war, Beckett and Cioran began to develop the distinctive literary styles for which they would become known. For both writers, stylistic evolution necessitated a switch to a new language: French. Although Beckett composed his first texts in French in the summer of 1937 (Dollé 11), he did not adopt French as his principal literary language until after the war. In a letter dated February 17, 1954, Beckett explains to a certain Mr. Naumann: “Since 1945 I have written only in French. Why this change? It was not deliberate. It was in order to change, to see, nothing more complicated than that, in appearance at least” (*Letters: 1941-1956* 464). Cioran, similarly, did not begin writing in French in earnest until after the war, explaining in his 1956 work, *La tentation d’exister*: “Before the war I published various essays in Rumanian of a more or less philosophical nature. I only began writing in French in about 1947” (*Temptation* 223).

For Beckett, writing in French was one way to limit Joyce's influence. Anne Atik, a close friend of Beckett, explains how he "grew impatient with the 'juvenile' literary allusions very densely embedded in his early work. Although a great reader, he disliked flaunting a too-visible wardrobe of learning" (52). The French language compelled him to be more disciplined since he could not exhibit the same sort of mastery in French he could in English. This is almost certainly what he meant by "the need to be ill equipped" (*Letters 1941-1956* 642). French also helped Beckett communicate the darker themes that had preoccupied him since the famous revelation of 1946: "With a more limited vocabulary, free from the more vigorous or playful aspects of English, and to a degree shored up by the formality of French, his work increasingly suggests the inability of language to convey the depth of human suffering" (Banville n. pag.).

For Cioran, the principal appeal of French was that it enabled him to move beyond the lyricism of his early writings. The Romanian expatriate consciously modelled his French, which John Pilling describes as "classical, restrained, spare, formal, apodictic" (313), on that of the French moralists. Cioran explained this attraction in an interview with Jason Weiss: "I turned to the French writers known as the moralists, such as La Rochefoucauld or Chamfort, who wrote for society ladies and whose style was simple, but who said very profound things" (106). Pilling points out that, while Beckett's French was more colloquial than Cioran's, the former nevertheless shared the latter's appreciation for the eighteenth century (313), which explains why he found Cioran's classical style appealing.

Cioran's adoption of French went hand in hand with his reinvention as a European, rather than Romanian, author. The most significant measure he took was the

creation of a pseudonym: E.M. Cioran. According to Simone Boué, Cioran, a lifelong Anglophile, borrowed his initials from the English writer, E.M. Foster (32). Cioran's decision reflected his conviction that he was not simply a new author but a new person: "After certain experiences, we should change names, since we ourselves are no longer the same" (*Trouble* 78). Zarifopol-Johnston confirms the significance of his decision:

Using the ordinary letters of his own Romanian *name*, he raised them to the status of famous *initials*. Thus Cioran, an unknown author, a "barbarian" from the margins of Europe, found the elements for the creation of a new authorial persona. Emil, the Romanian, the Transylvanian, turned himself into the cryptic E.M., and by this act of baptismal abbreviation he reinvented himself as a "civilized" West European author. (8)

No longer Emil Michel, the author of the *Transfiguration*, Cioran could cultivate a new, less political persona.

Even as Beckett and Cioran began writing the works that would establish them as well-known authors among French intellectuals, they increasingly found themselves at odds with the political and philosophical consensus that was emerging among the same. The consensus in question centred on existentialist philosophy and left wing politics (usually Marxism) and was driven by the editorial committee of *Les Temps modernes*, which included Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Judt 210). While *Les Temps'* consensus around existentialism is unsurprising given its editorial committee, its consensus around Marxism requires some explanation.

According to historian Tony Judt, "[t]he importance of the Communist question for intellectuals in France was [...] a consequence of the ubiquitous presence of the

French Communist Party (PCF)” (212). The PCF had played an important role in the French Resistance, earning the name *le parti des 75 000 fusillés* (“the party of the executed 75,000”), and was rewarded with 28 percent of the vote in 1946 (212). But while French Communists could boast of their contribution to the Resistance, other Frenchmen could not. Judt notes that it was not “until the very end of the occupation” that the “the number of active resisters exceeded[ed] the numbers of those who collaborated with the Nazis out of belief, venality or self-interest” (33). Championing the PCF and/or Communism generally was one way for French intellectuals to forget about the full extent of collaboration during the occupation.

During the late 1930s, Beckett had known a number of Communists, mostly friends of Suzanne (Knowlson and Haynes 36). According to Anthony Cronin, Suzanne played an important role in shaping Beckett’s politics during the occupation:

She [Suzanne] was left wing and, particularly after the summer of 1941, would [not] have been in doubt where she stood in relation to defeat and the occupation. There is little doubt that her influence in this regard was all important. Though she was not herself a member of Gloria, she had been in the Communist movement and had many friends there. (326)

Beckett was thus familiar with Communism as both an ideology and a movement. But while his attitudes remained “left-wing and anti-establishment” (Knowlson and Haynes 36), he himself rejected Marxism as a philosophy (36).

Beckett’s attitude toward Marxism can be glimpsed in several of his writings. Several of his works, for instance, contain comic references ridiculing Stalin and his cult.

In *More Pricks Than Kicks*, the narrator describes a boorish figure as “a kind of rubber Stalin” (134) while in *Eleuthéria* a minor character praises the protagonist as “the heroic young man” who was “shot by Franco, shot by Stalin” (87-88). Even *Waiting for Godot* originally contained an offhand reference to Stalin, which Beckett ultimately removed because he felt it “destroyed the timelessness of the rest of the dialogue” (Bair 426). Unquestionably, however, the most revealing of Beckett’s works, from the point of elucidating its author’s feelings about Marxism, is *La Fin*.

Beckett began writing what would become *La Fin* in February 1946 (Cohn 129). Although begun in English, *La Fin* was to be the author’s first French work of any length. *Les Temps modernes* published the first half of the story in 1946 under the mistaken impression it was a self-contained piece; when Beckett submitted the story’s second half, Simone de Beauvoir declined to publish it. Beauvoir’s rejection prompted Beckett to write her a pointed letter in which he declared, “[T]here is a wretchedness which must be defended to the very end, in one’s work and outside it” (*Letters: 1941-1956* 42).

Beckett’s reply is revealing when one considers the content of the story. The narrator-protagonist is an old man who has recently been ejected from an unspecified charitable institution. He lives an uncertain existence, unsure where he will find shelter one day to the next. One day he witnesses “a strange scene”: “a man perched on the roof of a car and haranguing the passers-by” (*Prose* 94). The narrator is able to make out snippets of the man’s discourse – “Union ... brothers ... Marx ... capital ... bread and butter ... love” (94) – but is unable to make sense of them. Eventually, the orator turns his attention to the narrator and addresses himself to the crowd:

Look at this down and out, [...] this leftover. If he doesn't go down on all fours, it's for fear of being impounded. Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for muckheap. And there are a thousand like him, worse than him, ten thousand, twenty thousand—. [...] Every day you pass them by, [...] and when you have backed a winner you fling them a farthing. [...] It never enters your head, [...] that your charity is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized. (94)

Beckett's point is clear: although the orator presents himself as a champion of the dispossessed, he actually regards them with contempt. In his letter to Beauvoir, Beckett implicitly identifies himself with his wretched narrator; Beauvoir, in denying the wretched a voice, is likened to the crazed orator, which is fitting given her politics.

Cioran did not reject Marxism *tout court* until after the war. During his nationalist phase, he expressed sympathy for the Communist goal of a classless society and held Lenin in high esteem. Martha Petreu explains why a right wing thinker like Cioran might express appreciation for Lenin and certain Communist ideals:

Like many other thinkers between the wars, Cioran perceived the artisans of the century's two totalitarian systems, Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler, as members of the same order, whether on the right or the left. This was because far-right doctrine embraced overtly socialist elements [...] The disastrous events of the Second World War had to occur before the ideological differences between the far right and the far left became evident. (162)

Thus, despite his allegiance to the far right, Cioran was not anti-Communist as a young man. Following the war, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) began its rise to political dominance, achieving full control of the country in the early 1950s. Ironically, the

Romanian Communists, in pursuing a “national path” to Communism, implemented precisely the sort of national collectivism Cioran had envisioned prior to the war. By this time, however, Cioran had become disillusioned with all forms of political activity: “Having experienced the fascination of extremes,” he wrote, “I have stopped somewhere between dilettantism and dynamite” (*Gall* 31).

Beckett and Cioran were not only at odds with France’s political *zeitgeist*; they were also at odds with its philosophical *zeitgeist*. Although *En attendant Godot* has been subjected to numerous existentialist readings, its playwright was never part of the existentialist school. Martin Esslin acknowledges this point in his classic study, *The Theatre of Absurd*: “Beckett... never consciously expressed Existentialist views” (61). Knowlson, who knew Beckett intimately for several decades, recounts how Beckett, when asked about Sartre’s philosophy, said he found “the actual limitations on man’s freedom of actions [...] far more compelling than the theoretical freedom on which Sartre laid so much stress” (*Images* 18).

Like Beckett, Cioran disagreed with existentialism’s emphasis on human freedom. For the latter, freedom was a feeling rather than a fact: “I *feel* I am free but I *know* I am not” (*Trouble* 92). As a result, Cioran rejected the notion of responsibility. For Sartre, individual responsibility was the logical conclusion of existentialist thought:

That is what I mean when I say man is condemned to be free: condemned because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world he is responsible for everything he does. (29)

Cioran, beginning from similar premises, drew the opposite conclusion: “The problem of responsibility would have a meaning only if we had been consulted before our birth and

had consented to be precisely who we are” (*Trouble* 97). Taking this train of thought to its logical conclusion, he held that “[n]o one is responsible for what he is nor even for what he does” (51).

The final point of contention between Sartre and Cioran was the former’s insistence that “intellectuals were obliged to take a stand on the side of progress and History, whatever the occasional moral vicissitudes” (Judt 212). Such a stance made little sense to Cioran who regarded History as “nothing but a procession of false absolutes” (*Decay* 3). The Second World War, moreover, had convinced Cioran that History was “[a] *dynamism of victims*” (*Gall* 126), with victims and victimizers alternating places in an incomprehensible sequence of events. Consequently, far from encouraging others to engage with History, he asserted that the person who “however briefly halts humanity on its march is humanity’s benefactor” (65).

Reflecting on Beckett and Cioran’s disagreements with the post-war *zeitgeist* helps us to understand how these two writers, so different from each other prior to and during the war, should come to be regarded as “*frères*” (Pilling 307, emphasis added). But Beckett and Cioran’s commonalities extended well beyond a repudiation of existentialism and Marxism. The two writers explored many of the same themes in their early French works, most of which can be traced back to Arthur Schopenhauer.

The primary idea Beckett and Cioran took away from their reading of Schopenhauer was that “constant suffering is essential to life” (Schopenhauer, *Will* 185). This notion appears in nearly all of Beckett’s post-war writing and his characters seem to take it for granted. In *Mercier et Camier*, Beckett’s first attempt at a novel in French, it arises in the course of the protagonists’ banter:

What are you musing on, Mercier?

On the horror of existence. (22)

Later in the same novel, Watt, the protagonist of an earlier work, appears in order to thunder, apropos of nothing, “Fuck life!” (118) Beckett carried this theme over to his second French novel, *Molloy*, in which the titular protagonist asserts, “[T]he whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery” (*Novels* 13).

A similar, negative assessment of life is found in virtually all of Cioran’s work. His first book in French, *Précis de décomposition*, suggests that life is possible “*only by the deficiencies of our imagination and our memory*” (*Decay* 26, emphasis in original). For this reason, “*To live* signifies to believe and to hope – to lie and to lie *to oneself*” (83, emphasis in original). Life being what it is – “senseless, speechless, issueless misery” (Beckett, *Novels* 13) – both writers agreed with Schopenhauer “that total non-existence would be decidedly preferable” (*Will* 204).

For Cioran, deciding in favour of non-existence meant rejecting the pseudo-solutions of philanthropists and reformers: “The abundance of solutions to *aspects* of existence is equalled by their futility” (*Decay* 6). This is not to suggest Cioran believed there was a solution – far from it! The Romanian dryly observed, “There is no specific in our pharmacies against existence” (29). Beckett, by and large, shared Cioran’s point of view on this matter, commenting, “The error is one of wanting to live” (*Eleuthéria* 50). In his first play, *Eleuthéria*, Beckett mocks the idea that policy can remedy what is wrong with humanity by having one of his characters, “a doctor who is interested in mankind,” (12) propose a solution as radical as it is monstrous:

I would prohibit reproduction. I would perfect the condom and other appliances and would generalize their use. I would create state-run corps of abortionists. I would impose the death sentence on every woman guilty of having given birth. I would drown the newborn. I would campaign in favor of homosexuality and myself set the example. And to get things going, I would encourage by every means the recourse to euthanasia, without, however, making it an obligation. Here you have the broad outlines. (43)

While the doctor's views are certainly not Beckett's, they do parody the latter's. His speech demonstrates that even an individual who is cognisant of the basic problem of existence cannot generate a moral solution.

One of the interesting aspects of *Eleuthéria* is its historical specificity. Unlike other plays by Beckett, such as *Fin de partie* and *Happy Days*, *Eleuthéria* is set in a definite place and time. Initially, the play seems ahistorical enough, concerning, as it does, Victor Krap, who, "for reasons still to be determined, seems to have lost his taste for life" (105). As the play progresses, however, it makes several allusions to significant events and figures from the twentieth century. We have already seen that *Eleuthéria*'s apathetic protagonist is at one point celebrated as "the heroic young man [...] shot by Franco, shot by Stalin" (87-88), but there are other, more significant allusions. In the second act, the glazier, who has taken an interest in Victor's condition, muses, "All right [...] there's some feeling out to be done. If only to keep down the number of casualties" (94). This is a subtle allusion to war, one which finds a parallel in *En attendant Godot*:

ESTRAGON

The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

VLADIMIR

What other? [*Pause.*] What other?

ESTRAGON

Like billions of others. (*Godot* 211)

The names Franco and Stalin, as well as the subtle allusion to war's casualties, locates *Eleuthéria* squarely in the twentieth century, sometime after the Second World War. By itself, the play's historical setting might not be so interesting were it not for the fact it is cited as one of the reasons for the protagonist's weariness with life. Dr. Piouk, the same doctor who proposes the creation of a state-run abortionist corps, is the first to consider this possibility: "Let us assume that he is complaining quite simply of existing, of the life syndrome. It's conceivable, isn't it? We are no longer in the nineteenth century" (113). A few pages later, he reflects, "Experience so weighs him down that he prefers to cancel himself out of it. Everybody understands that. It's no longer the Third Republic" (119).

Dr. Piouk's references are intriguing. The nineteenth century, especially if understood to mean "the long nineteenth century," was a period of revolution and reaction, in which the nation's pendulum swung back and forth between left and right. Insofar as the reference is a positive one, Beckett may have intended the sense of hope and renewal that characterized the early period of the French Revolution and, later, the Paris Commune. The second reference is more straightforward as it corresponds with the France Beckett knew before the war. For a young writer like Beckett, the Third Republic contrasted favourably with the censorship and theocracy of the new Republic of Ireland.

Unfortunately, The Second World War swept away the Third Republic and ushered in the Vichy Regime, with all the darkness that came with it. Thus, Victor's "life syndrome" (113), despite its existential overtones, is anything but ahistorical: it is firmly rooted in the devastation of World War Two and the disillusionment that followed.

The ghosts of the Second World War haunt Cioran's post-war output at least as much as they do Beckett's. In *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, his second book in French, he writes, "This century carries me back to the dawn of time, to the last days of Chaos" (Cioran, *Gall* 130). Like Beckett, Cioran was interested in "keep[ing] down the number of casualties" (*Eleuthéria* 94). In his eyes, fanaticism was the primary culprit behind the twentieth century's long list of disasters. In an interview given long after the war, Cioran was asked if his experiences during the war entered into his first book:

Oh yes, inevitably, a lot. The book begins with a denunciation of fanaticism.

Before the war, I wasn't concerned with history. The phenomenon of history is only comprehensible if one admits the idea of original sin. (Weiss 127).

In fact, Cioran's concern with History dates back much earlier, as far back as his early twenties, when he wrote his first book, *Pe culmile disperării* (*On the Heights of Despair*). Still, he is correct that his experiences during the war shaped his views on fanaticism.

The "denunciation of fanaticism" he alludes to in the interview is particularly revealing:

In itself, every idea is neutral, or should be; but man animates ideas, projects his flames and flaws into them; impure, transformed into beliefs, ideas take their place in time, take shape as *events*: the trajectory is complete, from logic to epilepsy... whence the birth of ideologies, doctrines, deadly games. (*Decay* 3)

A few pages later he equates the faith of the martyr with the violence of the tyrant: “the fanatic is incorruptible: if he kills for an idea, he can just as well get himself killed for one; in either case, tyrant or martyr, he is a monster” (*Decay* 5).

As far as Cioran was concerned, individual ideas mattered less than the passion with which people held them. This is what he meant by “the interchangeable character of ideas” (*Decay* 4). A fanatic might be an anarchist one day and a conservative the next, but his basic disposition was unlikely to change. “We change ideas like neckties,” he wrote (11). The appropriate remedy for fanaticism, then, is not a particular set of ideas, such as democracy or republicanism, but rather an attitude of healthy scepticism.

Several commentators have noted the central place of scepticism in Beckett’s ethic. According to John Calder, Beckett’s English publisher and good friend for many years, Beckett believed “all knowledge is questionable” (20). Beckett’s affinity for doubt is born out by a 1949 letter to Georges Duthuit, in which he writes, “I have no wish to prove anything, and watertight theories are no dearer to me than those that allow dear Truth to slip through” (*Letters: 1941-1956* 140). Terry Eagleton, in his article on the latter’s politics, traces Beckett’s scepticism back to his exposure to Nazi totalitarianism: “Beckett’s art maintains a compact with failure in the teeth of Nazi triumphalism, undoing its lethal absolutism with the weapons of ambiguity and indeterminacy. His favourite word, he commented, was ‘perhaps’” (Eagleton 70). If Eagleton is correct, Beckett was very much at one with Cioran in regarding doubt as the corrective to totalitarian certainty: “No wavering mind, infected by Hamletism” wrote Cioran, “was ever pernicious” (*Decay* 4).

In a 1983 interview, Michel Foucault described the magnitude of Beckett's effect upon his generation:

I belong to that generation who as students had before their eyes, and were limited by, a horizon consisting of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism.

Interesting and stimulating as these might be, naturally they produced in the students completely immersed in them a feeling of being stifled, and the urge to look elsewhere. I was like all other students of philosophy at that time, and for me the break was [...] Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. (176)

Foucault's observation is astute, but he may just as well have been speaking about Cioran, as the Romanian expatriate equally represented a break with the prevailing paradigm of "Marxism, phenomenology, [and] existentialism" (189). These two writers sought to broaden the horizons of French intellectual culture through their re-articulation of the Schopenhauerian themes of suffering and non-existence as well as their hard-won conviction that doubt was among the most important qualities of the non-totalitarian mind.

CHAPTER 3: 1961-1974

I shall never get born and therefore never get dead.

Beckett, *Malone Dies*

The years 1961-1974 mark the peak of Beckett and Cioran's friendship. It was during this period that the two writers met, consoled each other, exchanged views on literature⁴, and developed a strong bond. It was also during this time that Beckett assisted Cioran financially. Beckett's financial assistance enabled Cioran to write *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, which, of all Cioran's works, most resembles Beckett in philosophy and style.

It is difficult to ascertain the year when Beckett first read Cioran. His earliest mention of Cioran can be found in a letter dated November 28th, 1956, in which he asks, "Have you read Cioran, I have just his latest [sic], La Tentation d'Exister, great stuff here and there. Must reread his first, Petit Précis de Décomposition" (*Letters: 1941-1956* 678). Unfortunately, Beckett does not indicate when he read Cioran's "first." (Evidently, he was unaware of the latter's Romanian work.) Still, one can speculate. Cioran achieved notoriety following his acceptance of the Rivarol prize in 1950 for his *Précis*: "Overnight, Cioran [became] a French author, immediately and often compared with Sartre and Camus, if only to be distinguished from them" (Zarifopol-Johnston 5). Beckett probably heard of Cioran around this time. But upon winning the Rivarol prize, Cioran withdrew from the literary circuit, refusing all subsequent prizes and most interviews. Henceforth, Cioran would acquire "an *inverse* fame, the reputation of a recluse, who, from his attic in the Latin Quarter... regularly launched his books like so many anathemas against our time" (7).

⁴ At one point, the two exchanged letters on how to translate "Lessness," the English title of Beckett's French work *Sans*, back into French, but were unable to find an equivalent.

Prior to meeting Cioran, Beckett promoted him in a quiet way. Richard Howard, Cioran's English translator, notes in his introduction to *All Gall Is Divided*, "It was from Samuel Beckett that we first heard of Cioran, whose 'little blue light' the author of *How It Is* discerned in the antres vast of consciousness" (ix). Howard may be alluding to the fact that Beckett played a role in promoting Cioran through the *Evergreen Review*, which was edited at the time by the Beckett's American publisher, Barney Rosset. Cioran's first appearance was in the autumn 1958 edition, where he is called "a new European philosopher." He appeared again in the March-April 1961 edition, to which he contributed "Beyond the Novel."

If Beckett discovered Cioran in 1950 or thereabouts, Cioran probably discovered Beckett around the same time. In his essay on Beckett, originally published in an issue of the *Partisan Review* from 1979, Cioran writes, "Let me say in passing that the first time I came across Beckett's name was some thirty years ago, when I found his little book on Proust in the American Library" (*Anathemas* 133). Assuming his dates are accurate, Cioran first encountered Beckett's writing in the late 1940s – a few years before Beckett heard of Cioran. Naturally, Beckett would have made a larger blip on Cioran's radar following the success of *En attendant Godot* in the 1950s, but Cioran does not mention the play in his essay on Beckett. He does mention it in a journal entry dated March 11, 1970: "Last night, *En attendant Godot*. [...] After fifteen years, she has not aged a day" (*Cahiers* 795). Depending on how one interprets this entry, Cioran may be saying he first saw the play fifteen years ago, in 1955, or else, he may be simply alluding to the play's debut, which was in 1953 (seventeen years earlier).

Despite the fact Cioran stumbled upon Beckett before the latter stumbled upon him, and despite the fact Beckett was the more celebrated of the two in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was Beckett who reached out to Cioran – as a fan. Cioran gave his account of their meeting to friend and fellow Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu:

G.L.: In what way did your meeting with Beckett come about? Did you meet each other by chance or did a mutual admiration bring you together?

C.: Yes, he had read something of mine. We came to know each other over a dinner, after which we became friends. (Liiceanu 235, my translation)

The dinner in question took place at the Closerie des Lilas in Montparnasse in 1961. According to Simone Boué, the meeting was “very memorable [*très impressionnant*]”: “Beckett didn’t speak, he was the absolute opposite of Cioran, the Balkan! But they had very deep common ground [*des terrains d’entente très profonds*]” (37, my translation).

Unfortunately, we have only a vague idea what the two discussed that evening. In his essay, Cioran recalls only that Beckett “acknowledged his great lassitude, his sense that there was nothing more to be had from words” (Cioran, *Anathemas* 131). This anecdote corresponds to what we know about Beckett during this time. Following *The Unnameable*, Beckett was unsure of how to proceed. Although he subsequently composed several important works of theatre, including *Fin de partie* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, he “continued to think he was a creative impasse” even while he “continued to experiment with new forms of drama and fiction” (Cohn 262).

We have already seen that, in terms of loquaciousness, Cioran was Beckett’s antithesis. Cioran elaborates upon this difference in his essay:

I come from a corner of Europe where outbursts of abuse, loose talk, avowals – immediate, unsolicited, shameless disclosures – are de rigueur, where you know everything about everyone, where life in common comes down to a public confessional, and specifically where secrecy is inconceivable and volubility borders on delirium. (*Anathemas* 130)

Notwithstanding the fact this is unfair and unflattering stereotype of Romanians, it is a fairly accurate description of Cioran himself. He goes on to explain how his fellow Romanians' verbosity "suffices to account for my fascination with a man who is supernaturally discreet" (130).

Discretion was not the only quality Cioran admired in Beckett. Gabriel Liiceanu's interview with Cioran, quoted earlier, contains a flattering portrait of Beckett, which highlights several of his other qualities:

You know, it's very hard for me to define Beckett. Everyone is mistaken regarding what concerns him, the French in particular. They all feel obliged to impress him [*de briller devant lui*], [...] Beckett is a very simple man, [...] It is necessary to be very discreet, above all not pretentious. (Liiceanu 235, my translation)

Cioran "adored" the fact there was "nothing Parisian" about Beckett:

The French have not contaminated him at all, neither in the good nor in the bad sense. He always gave the impression of having fallen from the moon. He thought of himself as a little Frenchified [*francisé*], but this wasn't the case at all. [...] He remained thoroughly Anglo-Saxon [*sic*], and this pleased me immensely. (235-36)

Cioran's affection for Beckett in this and other interviews is palpable. Even his mistaken attribution of Anglo-Saxon identity should be understood as a compliment, given his love of English culture.⁵ “*Je l’aimais énormément,*” he concludes (236).

In many ways, Cioran was the ideal conversation partner for Beckett, being, as he was, expansive, intelligent, and erudite without being ostentatious. As for his friend's silences, Cioran could more than compensate. Longtime friend Anne Atik describes how Beckett would withdraw into himself with little warning:

Even though Sam's was not an aggressive silence directed against anyone, but rather a sinking into his private world with its demons, or so we imagined, those present suppressed their acute discomfort and feelings of ineptitude when it happened. (7-11)

Cioran was not distressed by Beckett's silences, or not at first. He was happy enough to fill them with his own chatter or else wait for them to pass. Cioran was thus someone Beckett could spend an evening with without needing to speak.

* * *

The book that seems to have prompted Beckett to contact Cioran, *La tentation d'exister*, is a curious one. Unlike Cioran's first book in French, which is organized as a series of short (usually no more than a page or two) digressions, *La tentation d'exister* is made up of eleven essays, several of which consist of meditations on Europe's inexorable decline. It is difficult to imagine Beckett, in the winter of 1956, nodding approvingly while reading melodramatic lamentations like “Such as it is, the West will not subsist

⁵ Boué relates that Cioran once expounded to Beckett his theory that a Balkan cannot help being overwhelmed by the distinction of the English; Beckett responded that the English, on the contrary, were very vulgar. “The Irishman awoke in him!” Boué remarks (37-39).

indefinitely: it is preparing for its end” (*Temptation* 57) and “Symptom of exhaustion are everywhere” (59).

Essays with titles such as “Thinking Against Oneself,” “Advantages of Exile,” and “The Temptation to Exist” likely were more to Beckett’s taste. The first of these essays, “Thinking Against Oneself,” includes several sentences that would be at home in *Eleuthéria*. Cioran, for example, speaks of the need “to cherish our nothingness” (46) whereas the protagonist of *Eleuthéria*, whom Beckett modelled on himself, declares, “It’s perhaps time that somebody was quite simply nothing” (82). Cioran dreams of “an existence without qualities” (43); Victor Krap fantasizes about seeing himself dead (166). These sentiments, to be sure, go back to the Schopenhauerian preference for non-existence, but it still remarkable how Beckett and Cioran stylize them so similarly.

Without a doubt, the most interesting essay to consider, from the point of view of identifying similarities between our authors, is “Beyond the Novel.” This essay, published in French in 1956 and translated into English by Richard Howard in 1961, articulates Cioran’s belief that the novel’s hour has passed. Its author begins the essay by lamenting the passing of “a time when the artist mobilized all his defects to produce a work which *concealed himself*” (136, emphasis in original). The novelist who draws on his life “is only pretending to believe in it” (137). The result is a product that is transparent, obvious. What’s more, “[t]he advent of the novel without a subject, without *material*, has delivered a death-blow to the novel” (145-46). Henceforth, the novel is to be relegated to the dustbin of history, to borrow Trotsky’s expression.

Cioran’s essay is no doubt a response to the *nouveau roman*, which emerged in the 1950s, but his description of “the novel without subject, without *material*” fits

Beckett's post-war novels precisely, as does his summary of the new novel as one without "plot, characters, complications, causality" (145-46). The author's remark that "certain failures are sometimes fruitful" (148) likewise finds a parallel with Beckett's own ethos of failure, which he would immortalize in *Worstward Ho*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (*Nohow* 89).

Both writers also express doubt concerning the possibility of meaning in literature. In "Beyond the Novel," Cioran takes issue with "over-explicit" art, insisting that meaning itself "is beginning to date" (144). The characters in *Eleuthéria* deride the search for meaning in similar fashion: "Don't you see that we are all busy focusing over and over on something that has no meaning?" (117) Despite their contempt for meaning, they are unable to put it behind them, however: "A meaning for it must be found, otherwise we might as well ring down the curtain" (118). In *Fin de partie*, Hamm ponders the horrifying possibility that he and Clov are "beginning to ... to ... mean something" (*Endgame* 32). Clov rejects the possibility out of hand: "Mean something! You and I, mean something!" (32)

* * *

Following their dinner in 1961, Beckett and Cioran do not seem to have had much contact. Cioran's journals, which cover the years 1957-1972, do not mention Beckett until 1966. (Interestingly, they do not contain an entry regarding their meeting in 1961.)

The first mention of Beckett, not a positive one, is found in a journal entry dated June 5:

Dinner last night at the Bosquets' with Beckett, who hardly opened his mouth and left hastily following the end of the meal. Was it the loquacity of Jacqueline Piatier that exasperated him? I don't know. Was he drunk? It is painful to regard as odious a man

one respects [*Il est pénible de voir odieux un homme qu'on respecte*]. The whole evening he made abrupt gestures, like a neurotic with tics, [*comme un névropathe à tics*], which literally made me ill. His anguish or his exasperation, he transmitted it to me – it ruined my evening (*Cahiers* 368, my translation).

A second entry, dated September 21, contains a reflection on Beckett's relationship to his characters:

Sooner or later, one must draw the consequences one's ideas, that's-to-say *pay*. And it's then, and only then, that the work [*œuvre*] turns against its author. I think of SB, who more and more resembles his characters: it's their revenge; they force [*oblige*] him to fall [*à d'échoir*], to descend as low as he made them descend (*Cahiers* 405).

In chapter four, we shall see that Cioran pondered the nature of this relationship more than once; for the moment, it is sufficient to note that Cioran believed Beckett had fallen as low as some of his characters. This reflection may be related to the latter's off-putting behaviour in June, but, if it is, Cioran does not say so.

The two writers saw each other again on October 3. They met at 11 p.m. and entered an unspecified bar where they discussed theatre and their families (*Cahiers* 413). This time, Cioran seems to have been the one in anguish: "I am helpless in this world," the entry records, "And, what is worse, I don't see why it should be otherwise" (413). Beckett was a good companion, patiently listening to his friend's complaints. He asked Cioran if he was working. Cioran replied that, no, he was not working, and went on to explain the "nefarious influence" Buddhism was having on his writing (413). To make matters worse, he had begun to draw the consequences of his theories: "I *convinced*

myself of what I wrote, [...] I became *my* disciple” (413, emphasis in original). In order to continue writing, he would need to take the opposite path to the one that led him to his present situation.

After listening to Cioran’s grievances, Beckett comforted him:

I’m not sure, but I must have had something sad and pitiable about me, because when we parted, Beckett patted me twice on the shoulder, as one does to someone who feels lost and to show [*témoigner*] sympathy, and to have him understand he needn’t worry, that everything is fine. (413, my translation)

Following Cioran’s death, Simone Boué would recall how Beckett often encouraged Cioran during his moments of despair:

Cioran sometimes [...] had the feeling of being nothing, of being sterile, of being unable to write. He complained [*il se plaignait*] to Beckett, and Beckett listened to him, and gave him little, affectionate pats on the shoulder, like a doctor would do with a patient, [or] a friend who encourages, consoles. (38, my translation)

Shivaun O’Casey, an Irish actress who befriended Beckett in the 1950s, reveals that many people approached “Sam” for words of encouragement:

[H]e gave you so much of himself when you met him. You always felt you could go to him for advice. He was very *sympathique*. And the feeling that you’ve got to keep going, you know you are right, do it. [...] ‘Bon courage’, he said. (O’Casey 156)

But while Beckett’s sympathy may have been par for the course, the fact Cioran approached him with his burdens suggests he regarded Beckett as a close friend and a confidant.

Beckett seems to have been fond of Cioran in his own way. He liked his Romanian friend enough to introduce him to Suzanne, for example. The three even went out to dinner together from time to time, although Cioran did most of the talking (Boué 39). Several of Beckett's letters to Cioran are signed by or include a note from Suzanne. Conversely, Cioran mentions Suzanne – whom he refers to respectfully as “Mme B.” – in several journal entries.

The political and social unrest that engulfed France in the spring of 1968 affected Beckett and Cioran in different ways. The latter's journals paint a picture of a jaded conservative, dismissive of the ferment around him. His entry from May 17 is typical:

Read on the walls of the [Latin] Quarter:

“Culture is the inversion of life”

and “I'm at disorder's service”

Did the same student write the two “declarations”?

All “revolution” more or less demands Rousseau. (*Cahiers* 572, my translation)

Time Magazine's profile on Cioran, published August 9, 1968, affords a similar portrait:

Every night, during the “May Days” of the Sorbonne revolt, a greying, middle-aged man descended from his Left Bank attic flat and ambled over to the student-occupied Théâtre [sic] de L'Odéon. There he listened with amused interest as youthful nihilists denounced the entire span of French history as irrelevant. (n. pag.)

Cioran took in the events with cynical detachment, to some extent identifying with the students' enthusiasm, to some extent, regarding it with contempt. He knew from

experience that they would come to despise their adulation of Mao as he had come to despise his adulation of Hitler.

Beckett witnessed little of the action firsthand. Towards the end of April, he became ill, coughing loudly and losing weight. On May 4th, he saw a doctor who lived in a nearby apartment and learned he was suffering from “a sort of growth” (Knowlson, *Fame* 557). Following more tests, it was determined that Beckett was suffering from an abscess on the lung; he was placed on a regimen of antibiotics, denied alcohol and tobacco, and confined to his flat for a period of weeks (558). Beckett was thus a prisoner of his own apartment while the most dramatic events took place.

Despite his immobility, Beckett managed to keep abreast of developments by reading the newspaper and listening to the radio. According to Knowlson, several of Beckett’s friends, including the director Jean-Louis Barrault and the artist Henri Hayden, were adversely affected by the turmoil (*Fame* 558). Although Beckett never issued a statement regarding the *événements*, his attitude may be inferred from a letter he wrote to Theodor Adorno in 1969 regarding the latter’s bullying at the hands of student radicals: “Was ever such rightness joined to such foolishness?” (qtd. in Claussen 338).⁶

In September 1968, Cioran saw Beckett along a footpath near Luxembourg Gardens. Once again, he was struck how the author resembled one of his characters. Since his friend appeared absorbed in his reading, Cioran decided not to approach him, reflecting instead:

I like him a lot but it’s better that we don’t speak. He’s so *discreet*! Conversations requires a minimum of casualness [*laissez-aller*] and showing off. It’s a *game*, one

⁶ According to André Bernold, Beckett held Adorno’s students responsible for his friend’s early death (54-55).

Sam is incapable of. Everything about him betrays a silent monologue. (*Cahiers* 613, my translation)

In fact, Beckett was preparing to break his silence – on politics. Following the war, the Irish author had largely avoided making statements on political matters. In 1960, he helped circulate le Manifeste des 121, a petition condemning the French army's use of torture in Algeria, but did not sign it, fearing his residency might be revoked if he did. Beckett's precarious position did not prevent him from aiding others on an individual basis, but he preferred to do so discreetly. The 1968 imprisonment of Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal, whom he knew personally, compelled the normally reticent author to raise his voice in protest. Robert Sandarg expands:

During the autumn of 1968, Beckett made his first direct political statement since World War II when he joined a number of prominent French intellectuals who signed letters of protest to the Spanish authorities in Madrid decrying the imprisonment of Arrabal for supposed obscenity and treason against the Franco regime. (137)

Beckett not only wrote a letter on Arrabal's half, he agreed to appear before a tribunal, even though he regarded the latter as "ridiculous" (Knowlson, *Fame* 552-53). Ultimately, a conflict of dates prevented Beckett from appearing at the trial, much to his relief, but Arrabal ended up being acquitted anyway, thanks, in part, to the intervention of Beckett and others (553).

In late October, Cioran finished *Le mauvais démiurge*, which he described as "the fruit of several years of malaise" (*Cahiers* 624, my translation). Gallimard published the book in April 1969 and Beckett wrote Cioran the same month in order to express his high regard for the work: "I read Le mauvais démiurge with the same satisfaction that all your

books give me. In your ruins I find shelter” (Ms 47.540, my translation). Cioran was flattered enough to mention Beckett’s letter in his journal (*Cahiers* 715), even though he did not rate the book highly.

* * *

The principal theme underlying Cioran’s *Démiurge* is the Gnostic one that the creator of the material world is a petty, lesser god, who rules the universe much like a tyrant. Kluback, in his essay on Beckett and Cioran, argues that Cioran’s appreciation for Beckett was rooted in the latter’s Gnosticism:

He [Cioran] was the prophet of the Demiurge. He was a true prophet, loyal and unwavering. He spoke a truth that few men heard. When he found a kindred soul, he found a companion. He found in Beckett a Gnostic. He turned to him with admiration. (228)

Beckett certainly regarded the Judeo-Christian god as a sort of demiurge. In *Mercier et Camier*, the narrator speaks of the “universal malignity” who pours down rain on his protagonists (26). Mercier curses this malignity in Promethean fashion:

With both hands Mercier raised the umbrella high above his head and dashed it to the ground. He used another nasty expression. And to crown all, lifting to the sky his convulsed and streaming face, he said, As for thee, fuck thee! (26)

Camier, retaining his cool, retorts, “Is it our little omnimni you are trying to abuse? [...] You should know better. It’s he on the contrary [who] fucks thee” (26).

John Calder amusingly compared his friend’s interest in God to “a small animal’s fascination towards its predator” (106). Cioran’s interest was similar. He felt there was “no use pretending he [the demiurge] does not exist, when our daily stupors are there to

demand his reality and proclaim it” (*New Gods* 15). He would have agreed with Winnie, the protagonist of *Happy Days*, who reflects, “How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?” (31)

Given their preference for non-existence, Beckett and Cioran considered creation to be the demiurge’s gravest crime, Cioran going so far as to call it “the first act of sabotage” (*Gall* 96). Both men regarded procreation with similar apprehension, viewing it as a simulacrum of the former: “the horror of procreation, constitutes part of the interrogation of the creation: what is the good of multiplying monsters?” (*New Gods* 62) Refusing to obey the “criminal injunction of Genesis” (*New Gods* 10) was one way to defy the creator, Calder explains:

As Beckett speculated about the creation of the world, he increasingly envisaged the creator as a monster, but not necessarily a conscious one. The only way to frustrate that God (or nature) was to produce no children, and Beckett was true to his own principle. (130)

Cioran was also faithful to this principle, boasting in a later work of having “committed every crime but that of being a father” (*Trouble* 6).

The two authors’ disdain for procreation occasionally manifests itself in their work through their “disgust with the *useful* aspect of sexuality” (*New Gods* 62). Calder’s observation is germane:

Sex is always portrayed in Beckett with a mixture of fascination and disgust. [...] His disgust, well described in his fictions, of the whole process of generation is rooted in a philosophical conviction: bringing life into an evil world must be evil,

therefore the circumstances of birth with all their mess of blood and water and pain become not only unpleasant, but part of that evil. (53)

Even the pleasure of sex comes under scrutiny, being, as it is, little more than “pleasure in being alive” (Schopenhauer 179). Cioran actually goes further, dismissing the pleasure of sex as a mere simulacrum:

The world was not created in joy. Yet we *procreate* in. True enough – but pleasure is not joy, it is joy’s simulacrum: its function consists in deceiving, in making us forget that creation bears, down to its last detail, the mark of that initial melancholy from which it issued. (*New Gods* 11)

Perhaps the most damning portrait of sexual love is found in *Molloy*:

She went by the peaceful name of Ruth I think, but I can’t say for certain. Perhaps the name was Edith. She had a hole between her legs, oh not the bunghole I had always imagined, but a slit, and in this I put, or rather she put, my so-called virile member, not without difficulty, and I toiled and moiled until I discharged or gave up trying or was begged by her to stop. A mug’s game in my opinion and tiring on top of that, in the long run. (*Novels* 56)

Yet, Beckett and Cioran both knew sexual desire could not be exterminated by philosophical reflection or obscene literary accounts. Cioran acknowledged this in *La mauvais démiurge* when he wrote, “Unfortunately, we cannot exterminate our desires; we can only weaken them, compromise them” (*New Gods* 79).

The duty of compassion is perhaps the sole positive precept to come out of this pessimistic line of thinking. If life is suffering, and all living being suffers, then it follows that one should extend compassion to one’s fellow sufferers. Cioran reasons his way to

this conclusion in *La mauvais démiurge*: “Whatever is alive, the most repellent animal or insect, shudders with fear – does nothing but. Whatever is alive, by the simple fact of living, deserves commiseration” (*New Gods* 42). Belacqua, Beckett’s first major protagonist, is said to reserve “his small stock of pity [...] entirely [for] the living, by which is not meant this or that particular unfortunate, but the nameless multitude of the current quick, life, we dare almost say, in the abstract” (*Pricks* 114).

The importance of compassion in Beckett and Cioran’s thinking reflects, not surprisingly, another debt to Schopenhauer, who considered compassion to be the basis of all morality. For the both men, compassion also had the advantage of being highly resistant to systematization of any kind and appropriation by ideology. It was thus ideally suited for the purpose of subverting totalitarianisms of all kinds.⁷

* * *

In February 1970, Cioran went to see *Oh les beaux jours* at the théâtre Récamier (*Cahiers* 792). A few days later, he saw Beckett and Suzanne, finding the former more animated than usual (793). The two discussed Beckett’s early forays into the theatre, with Beckett explaining he came to the theatre almost by accident, needing a relaxation after writing novels; he never thought that what he regarded as a distraction would assume such an importance (793). Beckett then went on to explain the appeal of the theatre, with its conventions, contrasting it with the “arbitrariness and limitlessness of the novel” (793, my translation).

⁷ Jackie Blackman infers from her talks with Beckett’s lover Barbara Bray that the former’s opposition to Communism was rooted in his sense of compassion: “When I asked [Barbara] what Beckett thought of Communism, she replied: ‘He wouldn’t have liked the cruelty that went with Communism. He would have had a vision of the gulags and the famine’” (“Post-war” 72).

Cioran saw two more of Beckett's plays that year: in March he attended *En attendant Godot* (795) while in May he attended *La dernière bande* (808). In his journal entry for 18 May, he relates a conversation with Suzanne. Cioran told her that Beckett seemed full of despair and that he was astonished Beckett was able to continue, to which Suzanne responded, "There is another side to him" (*Cahiers* 808-09, my translation). Cioran then remarks, as a postscript, "This response applies, to a lesser degree, to me as well" (809, my translation).

Cioran saw Suzanne again on June 13 (810). From their conversation, Cioran gathered that Beckett disliked the article he had written on him (810). As a result, he returned home "tired, full of despair" (810, my translation). Sadly, it is difficult to know which article Cioran is referring to. Peter John Murphy's *Critique of Beckett Criticism*, which includes an index of criticism in English, French, and German, only mentions the essay Cioran published in the *Partisan Review* in 1976 (135) – six years after the journal entry in question. It is conceivable that Beckett read an earlier, unpublished version of this essay since the same journal entry alludes to a conversation with Paul Valet about Beckett's characters in relation to Nietzsche's *surhomme* and the latter appears in the 1976 essay. It is unlikely that the two are identical as Beckett sent Cioran a card in 1986 – the year the essay was republished in the latter's *Exercices d'admiration* – thanking him for the kind words. Whatever the case may have been, Cioran's journal entry gives some idea of his regard for Beckett: "In fact, it [the article] isn't good," he laments, "But it doesn't preclude feeling hurt as though it were a refusal" (810, my translation).

Cioran next saw Suzanne on August 20 (825). She complained that Sam wasted his time with second-rate people and occupied himself with their problems (825). Cioran,

who had a tendency to do the same, asked Suzanne where Beckett acquired this “strange concern [*étrange sollicitude*]” (825). From his mother, she answered, who liked taking care of the wretched and the sick only to turn her back on them when their condition improved (825).

In September, Cioran spent an evening with the Becketts: “*excellent soirée avec Sam et Suzanne*” (844). His entry from the next day reads: “If the adjective ‘noble’ has any meaning, it applies to Sam; it is made for him” (844, my translation). Cioran next ran into Beckett one fine, November morning (881). The former was watching the feet of passersby when, lifting his head, he perceived Beckett, “that charming man” (881, my translation). Beckett had just undergone cataract surgery and was able to perceive distant objects more clearly. “I will finish by becoming an extrovert,” he told his friend (881, my translation).

Beckett and Cioran continued to exchange letters between 1970 and 1973, although we have to infer the contents of Cioran’s letters from the latter’s responses since Beckett did not hold onto them. A letter to Cioran postmarked December 27, 1973 reads: “Each page of *De l’inconvénient* went straight [to my heart], like all that comes from you” (Ms 47.551, my translation). Beckett is referring to Cioran’s 1973 work, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, which the latter began working on sometime in the late 1960s:

In 69,70, Cioran wanted to write an essay that would become *L’inconvénient d’être né*. This comes up all the time in Cioran: death, I accept; life I accept; but not birth. There’s the same thing in Beckett, this refusal of birth: it would be better not to have been born. (Boué 37-38, my translation)

As a matter of fact, Beckett aided Cioran financially while the latter was writing the book. In a letter dated December 9, 1969, Beckett writes, “Very happy you are letting us help you” (Ms 540, my translation). Cioran confirmed this fact in his interview with Liiceanu: “At a given moment, he [Beckett] even aided me financially” (235).

* * *

De l'inconvénient d'être né tackles a topic that preyed on both writers' minds: birth. In *La mauvais demiurge*, Cioran argued against the idea that existence was sacred, saying that it was “at best an accident – an accident which little by little each of us converts into a fatality” (*New Gods* 60). In *L'inconvénient*, he works backwards from existence to “its cause in the scandal of birth” (*Trouble* 19). This was certainly not the first time Cioran broached the topic in his French writing; in *Précis de décomposition*, to give only one example, he asked, “What sin have you committed to be born, what crime to exist?” (*Decay* 29) Be that as it may, *L'inconvénient* is fixated on the subject in a way his earlier works are not.

For Cioran, birth represented an “inexhaustible abyss” (*Trouble* 11) – one far greater than death. Like Beckett, he tended to regard it as a sin – “I do not forgive myself for being born” (15) – despite the obvious fact one does choose to be born. Behind this negative judgment lies the familiar longing for non-existence we find in all his works: “There was a time when time did not exist... The rejection of birth is nothing but the nostalgia for this time before birth” (17). Accordingly, Cioran derived considerable satisfaction from contemplating a world in which he was not born: “*Not to have been born*, merely musing on that – what happiness, what freedom, what space!” (22)

For Beckett, consideration of birth was inseparable from consideration of its opposite. This was because he tended to view life as cyclical: “the customary cycle of birth, life and death” (Calder 52). He thus regarded death as the beginning of decay: “all dies so fast, no sooner born” (*Prose* 136). The most vivid, and well-known, expression of this idea is found in *Godot*, where Pozzo poeticizes, “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (333).

Despite the fact Beckett sometimes regarded life as a punishment – “without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it” (*Novels* 239) – he did not accept death without reservations. Some of his characters, such as Victor Krap, welcome the prospect of death (albeit with qualifications): “If I was dead I wouldn’t know I was dead. That’s the only thing I’ve got against death” (*Eleuthéria* 166). Others are more conflicted. Malone is typical. Towards the beginning of the novel, he boasts, “The loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss” (*Novels* 183). Later on, however, he expresses sadness over his impending demise: “[T]here is no good pretending, it is hard to leave everything” (276-77).

* * *

Birth was a major concern for both writers, connected as it is to a host of other issues – life, suffering, and death, to name only a few – which engaged them endlessly. For this reason, *De l’inconvénient d’être né* is the book that best illustrates the parallels between Beckett and Cioran’s thought. It also marks the highpoint of writers’ friendship, representing as it does an investment by Beckett in Cioran as a writer. Following *L’inconvénient*, the two would grow apart as a result of political differences that could no longer go overlooked.

Chapter 4: 1975-1990

When you stress the essential misery of beings, you do not stop at the one that results from social inequalities, nor do you strive to remedy them.

- Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*

Sometime in the 1970s, Beckett's political conscience re-awoke. It is impossible to know what triggered this reawakening. After World War Two, he had remained as sensitive as ever to the distress of others, but evinced no political leanings: "we have no political opinions, simply limply republican," he wrote (*Prose* 112). And although he read the papers regularly, he seldom commented on current affairs. The following exchange from *Eleuthéria* is reflective of Beckett's attitude:

JACQUES Is there something that is of particular interest to Monsieur. (A Silence) Monsieur has seen the papers.

M. KRAP I saw them yesterday.

JACQUES What does Monsieur think of the new administration?

M. KRAP No, no, not that. (61)

While Beckett's re-politicization cannot be attributed to a single cause, human rights abuses in South Africa and Eastern Europe seem to have played a crucial role:

Always deeply humanitarian, he began, in a new development, to take a much more public stance on political issues: apartheid in South Africa, greater freedoms in Communist Eastern Europe, and human rights cases throughout the world (e.g. the house arrest of Václav Havel). (Knowlson, *Remembering* 248)

When Beckett's good friend, actor Patrick Magee, embarked on a tour in 1975 to perform readings from Beckett's oeuvre, he forbade him from performing in South Africa

(Knowlson, *Fame* 636-37). Beckett only relented in 1976 when a South Africa director of mixed race who wished to perform *Godot* using a multiracial cast (637). Since Beckett's "embargo" on South Africa was based on his opposition to apartheid, he saw no reason to deny this unique request.

Even as Beckett began to wade into politics, Cioran maintained his principled distance. In *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, he had written, "A relief bordering on orgasm at the notion that one will never again embrace a cause, any cause" (*Trouble* 160). In his 1979 work, *Écartèlement*, Cioran would pass a sweeping judgment on activists of all stripes:

When I see someone fighting for some cause or other, I try to know what is happening in his mind and what can be the source of his obvious lack of maturity. The rejection of resignation is perhaps a sign of "life," never in any case of perspicacity or simple of reflexion. The sane man never lowers himself to *protest*. He scarcely consents to indignation. Taking human affairs seriously attests to some secret flaw. (*Drawn* 103)

In the above passage, Cioran is equating the enthusiasm of those with a cause with the fanaticism of his youth. Having repressed his own "enthusiasm" (fanaticism), he looked upon that of others with considerable alarm: "The worst crimes are committed out of enthusiasm, a morbid state responsible for almost all public and private disasters" (*Trouble* 136). This was true even in those cases where the cause was manifestly just, such as the anti-apartheid movement.

Despite their increasingly different trajectories, Beckett and Cioran continued to exchange letters. In 1979, Beckett wrote Cioran in order to inquire about the latter's fall

and wish him a quick recovery (Ms 47.562). Cioran seems to have recuperated well: Bollon recalls how, at seventy, his friend had the silhouette of an adolescent and moved briskly (15).

That same year, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic sentenced Czech playwright and essayist Václav Havel to four and a half years in prison for “subversion” (*Telegraph*). Amnesty International, an organization Beckett supported (Knowlson, *Fame* xxii), responded by adopting Havel and other Czech dissidents as prisoners of conscience (677). Beckett was keenly aware of these developments, Knowlson explains: “He took an avid interest in what was happening to intellectuals, writers and artists in Europe. His concern was aroused by press reports of arrests and imprisonments” (678).

Particularly shocking to a writer like Beckett was the fact the Communist state had forbidden Havel to write. Since Havel had been silenced, Beckett decided to write on his behalf. This was a strange position for Beckett to find himself in, being, as he was, a basically “apolitical” writer:

Beckett sometimes expressed regret that, because of his essentially non-didactic approach to writing, he was unable (and had certainly been unwilling) to write anything that dealt overtly with politics. Now he had an opportunity to write a play that would demonstrate his solidarity with a victimised, imprisoned fellow writer but could express his own themes and be written in his own manner. He wasted no time. (678)

* * *

The piece of writing that would emerge from these unusual circumstances was *Catastrophe*, the title derived from the “original Greek meaning *catastrophe* [as] a turning point” (Cohn 373). Ruby Cohn summarizes the play as follows:

Catastrophe [is set] in an unnamed theater, and the three main characters are designated only by initials [...] Props are few: a plith for the protagonist, a chair and a cigar for the director, a pad and pencil for the assistant. [...] Under the director’s impatient instructions, his assistant manipulates the protagonist as if he were a prop, rather than a human being. Departed to the stalls to view his handiwork, the director rejects his assistant’s final suggestion that the protagonist raise his head to show his face. Pleased with his protagonist’s misery, the director admires his product: [...] Terrific! He’ll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here [...] These final words of the play are then subverted by the scenic directions: [...] P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies. (373)

Notwithstanding its dedication to Havel, the play’s political message is somewhat opaque. While the director can be viewed as a dictator, the “director’s cruelty to his actors [actually] parallels that of Beckett himself,” as Cohn herself points out (373). There are other reasons for rejecting this interpretation as well.⁸ More likely, Beckett sought to convey the dehumanizing effects of political totalitarianism, about which Havel knew all too well.

⁸ In his famous essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel explicitly rejects the idea that the totalitarian systems of Eastern Europe should be analyzed as dictatorships: “I am afraid that the term ‘dictatorship,’ regardless of how intelligible it might otherwise be, tends to obscure rather than clarify the real nature of power in this system” (*Letters* 128).

Insofar as Beckett may be said to have possessed a political philosophy, it bears a strong resemblance to the one advanced by Havel in two of his well-known, dissident-era statements: “The Power of the Powerless” (1978) and “Politics and Conscience” (1984). “The Power and the Powerless” was originally written as “a discussion piece for a projected joint Polish-Czechoslovak volume of essays on the subject of freedom and power” (*Letters* 125). The essay, which was written “quickly” (125), had “a profound impact on Eastern Europe” (125), inspiring a whole generation to challenge Communist absolutism.

Havel’s first statement – “The Power of the Powerless” – concerns the appeal of ideology as it relates to human beings’ search for meaning. According to Havel, ideology offers a “immediately available home” to “wandering humankind” (130): “all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on a new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish” (130). Unfortunately, the comforts ideology affords come at a cost. “[O]ne pays dearly for this low-rent home,” Havel explains:

[T]he price is abdication of one’s own reason, conscience, and responsibility, for an essential aspect of this ideology is the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority. (130)

Ideology is thus “a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them” (133).

The similarities between Beckett’s philosophy and Havel’s are easy to identify. Calder and Esslin have both argued that the spurning of palliative truths and false hopes

is central to Beckett's ethical system. To a considerable extent, the latter's stoicism consisted of embracing precisely the "mysteries, unanswered questions, anxieties, and loneliness" (*Letters: 1941-1956* 130) ideology seeks to banish. Ideology can even be likened to Godot since it, too, furnishes a false reason for living. Like Havel, Beckett thought it imperative individuals rely on their own "reason, conscience, and responsibility" and refuse to consign them "to a higher authority" (130) – for instance, a church or political party.

"Politics and Conscience," Havel's second statement, was written for the University of Toulouse, which had granted the Czech playwright an honorary doctorate (249). Because Havel was unable to attend, having no passport and being forbidden to travel, Tom Stoppard attended in his place (249). Even more than "The Power of the Powerless," "Politics and Conscience" illuminates the political character of *Catastrophe*. Whereas Havel's first statement is concerned with the temptation posed by ideology, Havel's second statement is concerned with the idea of "impersonal power," which Havel sees as having achieved "its most complete expression" in the totalitarian systems (258).

What makes impersonal power so dangerous is its fundamental hostility towards "the autonomous, integral, and dignified human 'I'" (263). In *Catastrophe*, the director is seeking to crush precisely this "I." For this reason, he is not a stand-in for the traditional dictator; rather, he is an embodiment of impersonal power. This is why he does not have a name and is, instead, designated by an initial. Unlike other dictatorships, which glorify *Il Duce* or *Caudillo*, totalitarian dictatorships depersonalize leaders as well as subjects. In *Catastrophe*, neither the director, nor the assistant, nor the protagonist has an identity separate from their function in the system.

For Havel, the dissident's task consisted of "resisting [...] the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power" (267). "If we can defend our humanity," he reasoned, "then perhaps there is a hope of sorts" (263). This last sentence is especially enlightening from the point of view of making sense of *Catastrophe*: not only is it undeniably Beckettian – "perhaps," Terry Eagleton observed, was Beckett's favourite word (70) – but it highlights the existence of hope. This hope is not to be confused with the "pernicious and incurable optimism" (*Proust* 5) Beckett so despised: Havel's hope is conditional ("If"), qualified ("of sorts"), and, above all, uncertain ("perhaps"). When, in *Catastrophe*, "P raises his head, fixes the audience" (*Plays* 301), he is asserting his humanity, thus signalling the possibility of hope, the hope that resistance is not futile.

* * *

Unlike Beckett, whose deep hostility towards police states led him to sign the Declaration against Martial Law in Poland in 1982, Cioran was flippant towards them: "The worst reproach to be made against police states," he wrote, "is that they oblige – for prudence's sake – the destruction of letters and diaries" (*Trouble* 154). Following the war, he was even apt to regard all states as police states:

How vague it is to say: I tend toward one system rather than another. It would be more exact to acknowledge: I prefer this police state to that one. History, indeed, comes down to a classification of police; for what does the historian deal with if not men's conception of the *gendarme* throughout the ages? (*Gall* 123)

Consequently, Cioran saw little point in taking a stance against martial law, whether in Poland or anywhere else.

Cioran's differences with Beckett can also be seen in their thoughts about ideology. As we have seen, Beckett shared Havel's belief that ideology encouraged individuals to forego responsibility; he spurned ideology's easy answers because he regarded them as an affront to human dignity. Cioran had no notion of human dignity. Instead, he believed that "Man is accursed" (Weiss 127): "That's why I'm against ideologies: they're either too silly or too generous. [...] All these moral concepts have no reality in history" (127). Thus, whereas Beckett considered ideology a false substitute for morality, Cioran regarded the two as more or less equivalent. That these differences had consequences for their friendship is suggested by a comment Cioran made in the same interview: "I like Beckett a lot, he's charming, very refined. I know him well, though we haven't seen each other in a long time" (Weiss 117).

* * *

If the political philosopher closest to Beckett in thought is Václav Havel, the political philosopher closest to Cioran is Savoyard, Counter-Enlightenment thinker Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821). Like Cioran, Maistre was a French-speaker who was not French. He was born in Chambéry and was thus a subject of the Kingdom of Sardinia rather than France. Maistre initially sympathized with the French reformers, but became alarmed with the increasingly radical nature of their demands. The Revolution turned him into a staunch royalist and defender of the papacy. In 1986, Cioran published his *Exercices d'admiration*, which included an essay on Maistre as well as his earlier one on Beckett.

* * *

"Joseph de Maistre: An Essay on Reactionary Thought," is perhaps the most revealing of all Cioran's post-war writing in terms of outlining his political philosophy.

For while Cioran exalts Maistre – he places him in the same company as Nietzsche and Saint Paul (*Anathemas* 22) – he mainly uses the latter’s ideas as a launching pad for his own. His decision to write an essay in praise of such a notoriously reactionary thinker is likewise telling; it attests to a backwards movement, a return to the fanaticism of youth.

For Maistre was a fanatic. Among the reasons Cioran gives for his admiration are:

The scope and eloquence of his umbrage, the passion he devoted to indefensible causes, his tenacity in legitimizing one injustice after another, and his predilection for the deadly epithet make of him that immoderate disputant who, not deigning to persuade the adversary, crushes him with an adjective straight off. (22)

This description fits the young Cioran as well as it does Maistre – the Cioran who believed “every man who loves his country longs for [...] the suppression of half his compatriots” (*Utopia* 4). It is as though the mature Cioran is admiring an earlier incarnation of himself in the arch-traditionalist Maistre.

Also disturbing is a second bit of praise: “His [Maistre’s] convictions have an appearance of great firmness: he managed to overpower the solicitations of scepticism by the arrogance of his prejudices, by the dogmatic vehemence of his contempt” (22). In the wake of his youthful flirtations with xenophobic nationalism, Cioran turned to scepticism to counter the appeal of fanaticism. In his essay on Maistre, he seems to lament this decision, admiring in Maistre precisely the fact he managed to resist “the solicitations of scepticism” (22).

Admittedly, Cioran never eliminated all reactionary opinions from his writings; it is simply that they are prominently featured in his essay on Maistre in a way they are not in

his other post-war writings. The most obvious example is original sin. For Cioran, original sin was a doctrine weighty in political implications⁹:

The doctrine of the Fall makes a powerful appeal to reactionaries of whatever stripe; the most hardened and the most lucid among them know, moreover, what recourse it offers against the glamour of revolutionary optimism. (42)

Humanity's fallen nature was such that it doomed all revolutions to the same fate:

Though we can endlessly debate the destiny of revolutions, political or otherwise, a single feature is common to them all, a single certainty: the disappointment they all generate in all who have believed in them with some fervor (58).

Cioran's unwavering adherence to the doctrine of original sin pit him against reformists as well as revolutionaries. His fundamental disagreement with the former stemmed from the fact that he did not believe in progress. In *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, he stated, in a sentence worthy of Maistre, "Progress is the injustice each generation commits with regard to its predecessor" (*Trouble* 128). In the same work, he alleged:

We invoke "progress" less and less and "mutation" more and more, and all that we allege to illustrate the latter's advantages is merely one symptom after another of an unrivalled catastrophe. (142)

By the time he wrote his *Exercices*, he had gone beyond depicting progress as a "mutation" (a neutral word), comparing it instead to "a retreat" (*Anathemas* 56).

Beckett shared Cioran's contempt for blasé progressivism, which saw the world moving from triumph to triumph while blissfully ignoring any suffering along the way.

⁹ Beckett also alluded to original sin in his writings, but he always conceived of it in apolitical terms, as "the sin of having been born" (*Proust* 49). Cioran's dictum that "the ultimate meaning of revolutions" is a "challenge hurled at the notion of Original Sin" (*Anathemas* 43) would consequently find no resonance with Beckett.

The difference is Beckett was very much in favour of progress; he simply did not think it was unalloyed or guaranteed. France is a case in point. Beckett felt deep affection for his adopted country, among other things, “for its culture, for its tolerance, its atmosphere, its appreciation of life” (Calder 12). Twentieth century France, whatever its flaws, represented a major advance over the absolutist, Catholic monarchy whose passing Maistre mourned.

Cioran may have benefited from France’s tolerance, but he did not respect it. Instead, he regarded it as a sign of weakness. In his essay on Maistre, he contends, “A religion’s degree of inhumanity guarantees its strength and its duration: a liberal religion is a mockery or a miracle” (74). The specifics of a religion were less important to Cioran than the zeal with which adherents of that religion sought to impose it upon others. French republicanism and secularism had become just the sort of “liberal religion” he despised. Beckett, in turn, likely regarded the French nation’s lack of zeal as a sign of maturity. It facilitated moderation, philanthropy, and humane activism, such as that which sought to bring down apartheid in South Africa. Cioran, owing to his violent temperament, could advocate apathy and revolution with equal passion, but not the sort of politics Beckett championed, which were concerned with what was feasible.

* * *

Exercices d’admiration was Cioran’s first work to achieve considerable success. In an interview following Cioran’s death, Simone Boué recalled the genesis of this victory:

The first book by which people came to know him was *Exercices d’admiration*. [...] Cioran got it into his head that he was going to be published in pocket book, he was going to be read by the young, that’s what he wanted, he would cease to be the author

of a single book, because after *Précis de decomposition*, he wrote [...] *La tentation d'exister*, *La chute dans le temps*, he was always the author of *Précis*. [...] Success thus came very, very late, with *Exercices d'admiration*. He became Cioran; before, he had been E.M. Cioran. (31-32)

But while *Exercices* was indeed a masterstroke for Cioran, it marked the end of his friendship with Beckett, who by then was active on behalf of numerous causes, and who consequently had little time for the reactionary pessimism Cioran was then espousing.

This gulf is born out in Beckett and Cioran's correspondence from 1986 onwards. Following Cioran's gift of his *Exercices*, Beckett sent Cioran only three cards, all of them perfunctory, even for Beckett. Beckett's health gradually deteriorated from that point on. He died in 1989, but not before learning that Václav Havel had been elected President of Czechoslovakia (*Fame* 704). This was only fitting, as he had been one of Havel's most eminent supporters¹⁰. He had lived to see the defeat of Nazi Germany and the beginning of Communism's collapse. Sadly, he did not live to see the fall of apartheid – something that would have undoubtedly brought him great joy.

Cioran survived Beckett by several years, dying in June 1995. After his death, Boué related several anecdotes regarding his friendship with Beckett. She recounted how Cioran sent Beckett his penultimate book only to receive a summary response (“Thank you very much”) (Stolojan 327). She also recounted how Cioran sent Beckett a second

¹⁰ Havel wrote a letter to Beckett in 1983 in which he thanked Beckett for his support: “I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer, too. [...] You are not one of those who give themselves away in small change – so that your participation in the Avignon event [for which *Catastrophe* was written] is even more valuable” (qtd. in Knowlson, *Fame* 680).

book only to receive an equally brief response (“Thank you again”) (327). Lastly, she related one of their final encounters:

Cioran met Beckett by chance in Luxembourg, the area along Rue Guynemer, where there are less people, and which we called *Beckett's way*. Beckett said to Cioran: we must see each other again before the curtain falls. (Boué 38, my translation)

In a way, it is appropriate the two should have parted on the subject of death, a subject that brought them together in the 1960s, before the politics of the 1970s and 1980s drove them apart. Both are now buried in Montparnasse Cemetery, only a few yards apart. As befits two disciples of Schopenhauer, the issues that came between them in life have been overcome in death.

EPILOGUE: BECKETT AND CIORAN AS PESSIMISTS

Everything seems black to him today.

Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*

A simple question: Were Beckett and Cioran pessimists? Their critics seem to have thought so.¹¹ English critic Kenneth Tynan in his 1957 review of *Fin de partie*, lamented Beckett's "facile pessimism" (qtd. in Bollon 20), arguing:

It is not only the projection of a personal sickness, but a conclusion reached on inadequate evidence. I am ready to believe that the world is a stifling, constricting place – but not if my informant is an Egyptian mummy. (20)

John Pilling declared "most of Beckett's post-war writing, and almost all of Cioran's" to be "pessimistic to an almost unparalleled degree" (307). Like Tynan, he viewed pessimism as a sickness. On this basis, he concluded that neither Beckett nor Cioran were "spiritually healthy writers" since they were not "ultimately optimistic about humanity" (307).

Tynan and Pilling's comments indicate they regarded pessimism as an attitude, perhaps even a mental illness, rather than a philosophy. UCLA Professor Joshua Foa Dienstag, in his book *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, argues that "[t]reating pessimism as a disposition robs it of its seriousness and transforms it into a mere complain, one with which some people are mysteriously and unfortunately stricken" (17). Instead of seeing pessimism as a mysterious affliction, he analyzes it as "a distinct account of the human condition that has developed in the shadow of progress – alongside

¹¹ Even Terry Eagleton, in his otherwise sympathetic article on Beckett, refers to the Irish writer as "a notorious pessimist" (67).

it, as it were – with its own political stance” (4). According to Dienstag, the basic tenant of pessimism is not inevitable decline but the denial of progress¹²:

While pessimists *may* posit a decline, it is the denial of progress, not an insistence on some eventual doom, that marks out modern pessimism. Pessimism, to put it precisely, is the negation, and not the opposite, of theories of progress. (18)

In answering our original question – Were Beckett and Cioran pessimists? – we shall make use of this definition.

Cioran did not consider himself a pessimist. He gave his reasons in an interview with Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater:

I don't have many readers, but I could cite a number of people who confided to one or another of my acquaintances: “I would have killed myself if I hadn't read Cioran.” Therefore, I believe you're absolutely right. [...] I am not a pessimist; I am *violent*... It's what makes my negation vivifying. (Savater 21, my translation)

Despite his repudiation of the label, Cioran wrote frequently of pessimism. In his 1952 work, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, he wrote, “The pessimist has to invent new reasons to exist every day: he is a victim of the ‘meaning’ of life” (*Gall* 12). He continued to think of pessimism for the next decade. A journal entry from 23 March 1964 reads:

“Pessimism, like optimism, is a sign of mental disequilibrium” (*Cahiers*, my translation).

Cioran's comments are simultaneously clinical and ironic. They also bespeak a certain familiarity with pessimism, one that comes from personal acquaintance.

¹² Dienstag recognizes that some readers may object to this definition, perhaps on etymological grounds (the word derives from the Latin *pessimus*, meaning “worst”). He points out that many of the most famous pessimists, including Schopenhauer, “did not profess a belief in any permanent downward historical trend” (18). Since most would agree that Schopenhauer was one of the most important philosophical pessimists, it does not make sense to define pessimism in terms that would exclude him.

Beckett also denied being a pessimist. In a letter to Tom Bishop dated 20 March 1973, he explained:

If pessimism is a judgment to the effect that ill outweighs good, then I can't be taxed with the same, having no desire or competence to judge. I simply happen to have come across more of the one than the other. (Qtd. in Knowlson, *Images* 20)

Beckett's definition of pessimism is idiosyncratic. Most likely, he was alluding to the argument made by Schopenhauer in his famous essay "On the Suffering of the World":

A quick test of the assertion that enjoyment outweighs pain in this world, or that they are at any rate balanced, would be to compare the feelings of an animal engaged in eating another with those of the animal being eaten. (*Suffering* 4)

Crucially, Beckett did not take issue with Schopenhauer on account of the latter's negativity; instead, he took issue with the philosopher on account of his certainty. Later that year, he met with Charles Juliet, who made the argument that Beckett had been "trying to tear apart" the "reassuring and gratifying image" man had made of himself (Juliet 39). In response, Beckett pointed out that "Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and a few others had proceeded him along the way" (39). Undiscouraged, Juliet continued to make his case until Beckett, whether out of conviction or weariness, answered, "Yes, perhaps with them there was still hope for an answer, for a solution. Not with me" (qtd. in 39).

Beckett and Cioran did not identify as pessimists, but they thought highly of a number. In his book, Dienstag identifies a number of pessimists "hiding in plain sight" including Rousseau, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Camus, and Adorno (5).¹³ Both men admired most of these authors; Anne Atik, for instance, recalls Beckett's

¹³ Dienstag includes Cioran in this list.

“love of Leopardi, Schopenhauer, his appreciation of Cioran” (31). Dienstag acknowledges this apparent contradiction in his book when he writes:

Although the writers I will discuss here – Albert Camus, Miguel de Unamuno, and E.M. Cioran – often went out of their way to defend the idea of pessimism, they did not always adopt this label for themselves, or not with any consistency. (118)

Quite possibly, Beckett and Cioran disassociated themselves from pessimism for fear of being misunderstood. Neither man, in discussing pessimism, rejected its basic tenant, which Dienstag identifies as the denial of progress. On the contrary, both derided blind faith in progress, which Dienstag argues is common to ideologies as diverse as liberalism, socialism, and pragmatism (18).

In laying out his “anatomy of pessimism,” Dienstag gives prominence to four propositions: “time is a burden; [...] the course of history is in some sense ironic; [...] freedom and happiness are incompatible; and [...] human existence is absurd” (19). He goes on to add that

there is a divide between those pessimists, like Schopenhauer, who suggest that the only reasonable response to these propositions is a kind of resignation, and those, like Nietzsche, who reject resignation in favor of a more life-affirming ethic of individualism and spontaneity. (19)

Beckett and Cioran both accepted the first proposition, that time is a burden.

Whatever its other meanings, *Waiting for Godot* is firstly a play about passing the time:

VLADIMIR

That passed the time.

ESTRAGON

It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR

Yes, but not so rapidly. (157)

Cioran expressed a similar sentiment in his 1979 work, *Écartèlement* (translated into English as *Drawn and Quartered*): “My mission is to kill time, and time’s is to kill me in its turn. How comfortable one is among murderers” (*Drawn* 107). Both writers insinuate that existence itself is possible only with regard to a finite period of time: one cannot go on waiting for Godot forever. As Cioran puts it:

We can function only with regard to a limited duration: a day, a week, a month, a year, ten years, or a lifetime. But if, by mischance, we refer our actions to Time, time and actions evaporate: that is the venture into the Void, the genesis of the Negative. (*Gall* 46)

The contradiction (or paradox) lies in the fact that one seeks to kill time even as one fears death’s arrival. Dienstag summarizes this dilemma by way of a simple formula:

“consciousness of time means consciousness of death” (21).¹⁴

Beckett and Cioran parted company on the second proposition (the course of history is in some sense ironic). History did not haunt Beckett the way it haunted Cioran. In part, this may be attributable to the fact Beckett had a more cyclical view of time than Cioran. In Dienstag’s account, “pessimism relies on an underlying linear concept of time, a concept that only became a force in Western thinking in the early modern period” (9);

¹⁴ This is what Cioran meant when he wrote: “A *conscious* fruit fly would have to confront exactly the same difficulties, the same kind of insoluble problems as man” (*Trouble* 31, emphasis in original).

pessimists differ from optimists only in their incredulity towards the benevolence of time's arrow. Beckett's plays throw a wrench into this account, as several of them do not seem to recognize the existence of any arrow. *En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*, and *Spiel (Play)* all have circular plots; few, if any, of his dramatic characters die – despite their best efforts, it must be said. Winnie accurately sums up the Beckettian universe when she says, “No better, no worse, no change” (*Happy Days* 13). If Beckett departs from pessimism on any point this is surely it.

In spite of his ambivalence towards the linear concept of time, Beckett had no difficulty accepting the idea that boredom was an essential part of the human lot. Dienstag sees boredom as a “historical concern expressed, not by all pessimists, but nearly exclusively by pessimists” (30). Like history, “boredom springs from this fundamental attribute of self-consciousness, it is effectively the baseline mental condition from which we can only be distracted, either by pain or by relentless activity” (30). Schopenhauer frequently returned to this idea in his own writings, believing “life swings like a pendulum backwards and forwards between pain and *ennui*, which are the elements of which it is made” (*Will* 198). Boredom concerns the pessimist because it reveals the nothingness at the heart of existence. This is depicted clearly in *En attendant Godot*:

We wait. We are bored. [*He throws up his hand.*] No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! [*He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.*] In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! [*He broods.*] (293)

Cioran saw boredom, and its relation to time, in much the same way: “To be bored is to guzzle time,” he wrote (*Gall* 47). In “Beyond the Novel,” he even asserts “there is only one thing worse than boredom, [...] the fear of boredom” (*Temptation* 83).¹⁵

The two writers differed also on the compatibility of freedom and happiness. While neither writer gave credence to the doctrine of free will, Beckett recognized the desirability of freedom in the political sphere whereas Cioran did not.¹⁶ In an interview given in 1986, Cioran set forth his suspicions:

Freedom is an ideal, but man is a devilish animal and tends to make poor use of freedom, that’s undeniable. Socialist governments don’t know this. Freedom has to be controlled, unfortunately, because man can’t stop himself. (Weiss 132)

For Cioran, freedom was both a political and a philosophical problem: “to what extent can the human animal be free without perishing?” (133) Beckett was wise enough to know that political liberty did not guarantee happiness, but he also knew, from his own experience of Irish censorship, how demoralizing autocratic rule could be.

Beckett and Cioran were more or less agreed on the absurdity of existence. In *La mauvais démiurge*, Cioran relates: “*Nothing matters*: a great discovery, if ever there was one, from which no one has been able to gain any advantage” (*New Gods* 74, emphasis in original). Speaking to Charles Juliet in November 1977, Beckett went one step further, claiming, “Negation is not possible. Nor affirmation. It is absurd to say that it is absurd. That’s still passing a value judgment. There can be no protest, no agreement” (qtd. 39).

¹⁵ Cioran’s observation finds a parallel with one of Beckett’s: “Nothing bores like boredom” (*Eleuthéria* 162).

¹⁶ Knowlson relates that Beckett kept a small sculpture by Russian sculptor Vladim Sidur on a ledge outside his window “as a permanent reminder of the struggle for artistic freedom in a totalitarian regime” (*Fame* 678).

Given their conviction that life was meaningless – worse, it was *boring* – we might expect one or both men to champion suicide. For while Beckett and Cioran were “as sensitive as ever Sophocles was that being is our greatest mistake,” they were not “so in love with their suffering that they [did] not long for it to be over for good” (Pilling 309). Be that as it may, neither advocated suicide as a remedy to the “mistake” of birth. In this, both were faithful to Schopenhauer who held that “the arbitrary destruction of a single phenomenal existence” was “a vain and foolish act” (*Will* 251).¹⁷ But this eschewal of suicide does not disqualify Beckett and Cioran as pessimists. On the contrary, it is typical of the pessimistic tradition. “No pessimist recommends suicide,” Dienstag explains, although he hastens to add that “[s]everal do recommend something similar: a withdrawal from life into a hermitage of inactivity and (depending on the writer) pure thought or pure sensation” (37).¹⁸

Beckett and Cioran departed again on the point of resignation. For Cioran, the absurdity of existence justified every life imaginable:

We should repeat to ourselves, every day: I am one of billions dragging himself across the earth’s surface. One, and no more. This banality justifies any conclusion, any behavior or action: debauchery, chastity, suicide, work, crime, sloth, or rebellion... Whence it follows that each man is right to do what he does. (*Trouble* 118-119).

In his personal life, he led a life of resignation. He rationalized his decision on misanthropic grounds: “I am interested in anyone, except *other people*. I could have been

¹⁷ Cioran’s critique of suicide was straightforward: “It’s not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself *too late*” (*Trouble* 32, emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Murphy’s solipsistic retreat is one example of this withdrawal into pure thought: “He sat naked in his rock-chair [...] it set him free in his mind” (1-2).

anything, except a legislator” (*Drawn* 125). Beckett, like Terrence Joseph MacSwiney, whom he alludes to in *Malone meurt*, “had political convictions, human ones too probably, just plain human ones” (*Novels* 273).¹⁹ As much as his characters might lament the fact there is “Nothing to be done” (*Godot* 9), Beckett was far from resigned in his life. His activities during the war, his support for human rights in Eastern Europe, and his boycott of apartheid South Africa all demonstrate his conviction that something *should* be done. In this, he was more likely Nietzsche “who reject[ed] resignation in favor of a more life-affirming ethic” (Dienstag 19), although “life-affirming” might be putting it a bit strong.

John Pilling, in his essay on Beckett and Cioran, concludes that, among the authors’ principal differences, is the fact “Beckett leaves us more able to breathe than Cioran” (313). This is not because Cioran was a pessimist and Beckett was not: both rejected narratives of progress, which, Dienstag would argue, makes them pessimists. The difference is that Beckett’s pessimism, like that of Camus, did not lead him to resignation. Gloomy as humanity’s prospects might be, Beckett held firm to his convictions: “I am up against a wall, but I have to move forward. It’s impossible, isn’t it? Yet you can still move forward, gain a few miserable millimetres...” (qtd. in Juliet 17)

¹⁹ An Irish playwright, MacSwiney was elected Lord Mayor of Cork in 1920. He was arrested on charges of sedition the same year and died following a 74-day hunger strike.

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