Introduction
There are many parallels and affinities between the work of Samuel Beckett and that of the Romanian-born philosopher E. M. Cioran (1911–95). Yet awareness of Cioran within Beckett Studies has been notably limited, often dependent upon Cioran’s memoir ‘Beckett: Quelques Recontres’ [Beckett: Some Meetings] (1974), which was eventually collected in Cioran’s late volume Aveux et anathèmes (1987). In that book, the recollection of Beckett appears amongst a notably eclectic constellation of admired international writers and thinkers, including Cioran’s fellow Romanian Mircea Eliade, Henri Michaux, Roger Caillois, Alexis Léger Saint-John Perse, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Maria Zambrano, and Jorge Luis Borges. In this context, Cioran’s admiring portrait of Beckett has wide resonance: a solitary ascetic figure, seemingly detached from the world around him, yet one oddly comfortable, perhaps at home, in Paris. This is a Beckett fretting continually about language and linguistic possibility, monkish, his presence a bit like that of Wittgenstein or of a Buddhist. The conversations that Cioran reports he had with Beckett are about Joyce and Swift; Cioran demonstrates that he knows Beckett’s book on Proust, Malone Dies, and that Beckett has been translating the prose aphorisms of the eighteenth-century writer Chamfort surprisingly into poetry in English (Cioran, 2011, 1191–5).

All of this of course chimes with a demotic sense which has sustained currency, a demotic sense of Beckett as a person and consequently as a writer. As Emilie Morin suggests, through quoting a phrase from Cioran on Beckett in the opening paragraph of her Beckett’s Political Imagination, such a portrait as that Cioran draws in ‘Some Meetings’ establishes a kind of signal consensus view – and it is one to be resisted, as her compelling and detailed argument on behalf of a more engaged and aware Beckett eloquently does (Morin, 2017, 1). Yet, and also, from even the bald description just given, Cioran’s version of Beckett is hectic and dishevelled in comparison to the ‘separate’ figure of the subject he otherwise creates. This is particularly so around the issue of ‘origins’, which Cioran claims we can all no longer have, so that it is equally important and wholly unimportant, for example, that Beckett is Irish (Cioran, 2011, 1194). On this ambiguity and other grounds, Cioran’s portrait of Beckett in ‘Some Meetings’, as well as being taken for a representative, even definitive portrayal of a uniquely otherworldly, noble, and saintly figure, deserves to be read comparatively against the spectrum of Cioran’s other engagements with Beckett himself.

More importantly, this ‘Some Meetings’ portrait should be placed alongside Cioran’s philosophical writings, particularly as they developed in the years after the Second World War. The affinities and shared preoccupations between the
two writers, in other words, deserve further exploration, as this Element undertakes, the better to understand those aspects of each writer’s work which particularly appealed, or which set resonances sounding between them. This Element is not, therefore, a study of influence, of that of Cioran upon Beckett, for instance. Both writers had established trajectories before they became aware of each other’s work. Rather, this Element seeks to trace some lines of the dialogue which clearly existed between the two. These lines ran through personal connection, and as both were writers and readers of each other. Their dialogue illuminates important moments in the development of their evolving thinking about their work, and also reveals much within the Parisian context that Beckett and Cioran shared from the later war years, through, severally, to their deaths.

The personal encounters between Beckett and Cioran through the 1960s and 1970s were largely casual – meetings in the Paris streets, for late-night drinks, at some dinner parties, even occasional visits to and dinners at the Becketts’ apartment. Beckett and Cioran each sent the other copies of their work on publication from the 1960s onwards. It is of course impossible to recover the substance of their conversation beyond what ‘Some Meetings’ recounts. It is also impossible to recover a material sense of what each knew of the other’s lives before they first met – an important issue, as we shall see, with regard to Cioran’s association with the Fascist group in Romania before the War.

This Element will seek to recover the traceable facts about the personal relationship. It will also trace the affinities in the thinking and writing of Beckett and Cioran as they developed, once both had adopted French as their predominant language as writers in the post-War years. There are affinities in the ways that their engagement with that post-War moment led both Beckett and Cioran to pursue a more broken, fragmented form in their work, an interrupted form that was also echoed in the content of that writing – a shared preoccupation with alienated identities, exiles, and refugees, and with ruined, even post-apocalyptic landscapes. In the process of this development too, we find that in both authors, the attitude of the writing towards its audience shifts, becomes more intransigent in its refusal to accommodate the reader, even violent in its refusals in that regard.

To this end, Section 1 of this Element will document the known relationship between Beckett and Cioran, pointing out the inadequacies in the extant biographical accounts. It will consider both writers as outsiders in post-War Paris, and the virtues which particularly Cioran came to perceive in that situation. Cioran’s controversial self-characterisation as a ‘métèque’, a non-autochthonous resident alongside native inhabitants, will be placed alongside the complex identifications of the personae in Beckett’s Texts for Nothing as shared responses to the immediate
Beckett and Cioran

post-War moment. The French original of *Texts* will be weighed alongside Beckett’s translation of it into English, to reveal the different inflections which enter as Beckett reconsiders some of the key notes for different readers. Section 2 of this Element will pursue the underpinnings of the growing alteration in both Beckett’s and Cioran’s work by thinking through Beckett’s early understanding of philosophy, as figured in his ‘Philosophy Notes’ of the 1930s. This is in order to consider the shared perspective upon the history of Cioran’s discipline that Beckett had when meeting Cioran. The philosophical pessimism and scepticism in both writers’ response to their circumstance informs the formal shapes their work increasingly adopts. The section will discuss Beckett’s *Fizzles* in this regard, alongside some of Beckett’s 1970s poems, as the discussion further takes up some shared interests in French and English authors of the eighteenth century.

What the philosophical debate in Section 2 tends towards is an increasing characterisation of that formal and content-led aspect of both Beckett’s and Cioran’s later writings – interest in the fragment and the aphorism as the proper shape truly sceptical work must assume. Section 3 considers this conclusion against Beckett’s *Comment C’est/How It Is*, presenting the confrontational nature of this text in its understanding of historical change. A brief coda to the Element then turns to Paul Celan, a fellow Romanian and an acquaintance and translator of Cioran, to provide a final reflection upon the formal possibilities that these non-French dwellers in Paris increasingly explored and shared across the latter part of their writing careers.

1 ‘Great stuff here and there’ – Beckett and Cioran Together

1.1 Dinners and Phonecalls – Personal Connections


1 ‘I was taken aback by the similarities which exist between Sam’s world view and my own. Basically, the same impossibility of being.’ All translations in this discussion are my own unless otherwise indicated. Thomas Cousineau has provided translations of what he called some of the ‘more memorable’ passages from Cioran’s *Cahiers* regarding Beckett – but this passage, amongst several other important accounts of meeting with Beckett or reflecting upon his works, is not included (Cousineau, 2005, 5). Cioran published a brief article, ‘Beckett ou l’Horreur d’être né’, in response to the MacGowran evening – a stepping stone to Cioran’s next work, *L’inconvenient d’être né*, with which he was struggling at the time. The editors of Cioran’s *Oeuvres* imply that his
Beckett and Cioran were both personal and respectful regarding each other’s writing. The two seemingly first met at the Closerie des Lilas on 8 January 1956 (Cioran, 2011, 1579). As evidenced from Cioran’s *Cahiers*, memoirs, and interviews, and from Beckett’s correspondence, many encounters followed, by chance and otherwise, in the boulevards, Luxembourg Gardens, through dinners, and late-night drinks sessions planned and unplanned. Beckett himself told Barbara Bray that he was encountering Cioran frequently in local stores and streets in the early 1960s (Van Hulle and Nixon, 2013, 169). These various encounters extended actively at least until February 1975, when Beckett mentions a recent phone call from Cioran in a letter to someone else. Typically, the call had obviously touched on mutually interesting topics, as Cioran is reported to have urged Beckett, soon to travel to Germany to oversee the Schiller Theater production of *Warten auf Godot*, to make sure to visit the site of Kleist’s suicide (Beckett, 2016b, 391). The connection then continues, perhaps at a less intense level, nearly up to Beckett’s death. The Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (hereafter the BDMP) confirms that Beckett’s library contained new editions of Cioran’s work, personally signed to both Beckett and Suzanne, dated as late as 1986 (Beckett, 2016a). The BDMP catalogue of the library perhaps also confirms what is suggested in Beckett’s correspondence – that he was at least somewhat familiar with Cioran’s first works written in French from just after the Second World War.

The library contains a 1949 (and presumably first) edition of *Précis de décomposition*, a 1960 edition of *Histoire et utopie*, and a 1961 edition of *La tentation d’exister*. Yet Beckett had already recommended *La tentation* in a letter of late November 1956 (‘great stuff here and there’), suggesting that he had read the book shortly after its publication (Beckett, 2011, 678). In the same letter, Beckett tells himself that he must reread *Précis*. Then, in June 1960, attendance at the performance enabled Cioran to see how he might write his own text, spurred by some of the more aphoristic phrases in Beckett’s work (Cioran, 2011, 1485).

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2 There seems some ambiguity around what constitutes ‘meeting’ here – Anthony Cronin’s biography, partly reflecting Cioran’s memory of it, gives the date as 1961 (Cronin, 1997, 563).
3 James Knowlson suggests that a distancing between Beckett and Cioran occurred across the later 1970s, as Beckett ‘had less in common with Cioran in terms of outlook than he had at first thought’ (Knowlson, 1996, 654).
4 Ackerley and Gontarski report that Beckett had visited the Kleist monument in 1969 (Ackerley and Gontarski, 2004, 299). André Bernold suggests that Beckett knew little of Kleist’s writing beyond the essay on the marionette theatre, but that he ploughed through a German book about Kleist in the early 1980s. In 1982, though, Beckett apparently told Bernold that he wished one of his short plays might be performed by marionettes (Bernold, 2015, 73–4, 76–7). As we shall see, Kleist forms a shared influence for Beckett, Cioran, and Celan.
5 Cioran published three books before he left Romania; their titles translated into English as *On the Heights of Despair* (1934), the politically controversial *Romania’s Transfiguration* (1936), and *Tears and Saints* (1937) (Zarifopol-Johnston, 2009, xxi).
Beckett suggested to Bray that a selection of passages from these two Cioran books would be ‘well worth’ making for the journal *X: A Quarterly Review* (Beckett, 2014, 336). Once Beckett’s personal acquaintance with Cioran had become established, he continued warmly to endorse each new work as he looked it over on publication, not least in comments to Cioran himself. In 1969, Beckett wrote from Ussy mentioning the ‘pleasure’ that all of Cioran’s books had brought him; the new one, *Le mauvais démiurge*, included: ‘In your ruins I feel at ease’ (Beckett, 2016b, 157). In 1973, *De l’inconvénient d’être né* is greeted as a further work that hits straight home; Beckett tells Cioran that he will return often to this ‘voix fraternelle’ [brotherly voice] (Beckett, 2016b, 348).6

And that ‘brotherly’ listening continued across this decade and more for Cioran too. For instance, late in *Cahiers*, in a passage from early November 1972, Cioran mentions running into Beckett at midnight in the street; they went to the Closerie for several hours, during which Beckett showed ‘youthful passion’ and excitement when describing his latest work, *Not I*. Then, three days later in the daybook, Cioran comes back to the subject: ‘Le moi, violé l’obstacle. Je n’arrive pas à le franchir. J’y suis rivé, incurablement’ [The I, that’s the obstacle. I can’t succeed in getting past it. I’m nailed to it, incurably] (Cioran, 1997, 996–7). The agony of the speaker in Beckett’s play is translated directly into the crucified, self-perceptive, self-commiserating awareness of Cioran.

Given these several documented affinities between Beckett and Cioran, including those perceived, as we shall see, in contemporary debates from the late 1960s onwards, it is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little commentary to date drawing the two writers together. Benjamin Keatinge laid out many of the grounds and reasons for undertaking what he conceived of as a ‘comparative study’ of the two writers in 2013, as well as delineating the ‘lack’ of such a thing in the multiple publications on Beckett where it might have been expected (Keatinge, 2013, 155, 157). Yet that more extended comparison has not emerged, licensing the study here. Moreover, where Beckett is admitted to discussions about Cioran, as suggested earlier in this Element, it is often through unquestioning repetition of the latter’s autobiographical accounts

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6 Cioran’s dedication of the copy of this text registered on the BDMP tells Beckett and Suzanne that in it he had tried and failed to write something that might be ‘lu par concierges’ [read by concierges] (Beckett, 2016a). The projected audience given here cites one of the perversive aphorisms later in *L’inconvenient*, which suggests that it is better for a writer to stick to a single idiom and that more is to be got by ‘bavarder avec une concierge’ [chatting with a concierge] than speaking to a learned person in another language (Cioran 2011, 867). The dedication might be taken as a shared wish for assimilation, although Cioran’s sense here of ‘tried but failed’ also suggests a continuing sense of the difficulties involved, which will form much of the subject of this Element.
such as his piece ‘Samuel Beckett: Some Meetings’ – accounts which Cioran’s Cahiers shows actually to have displeased Beckett, much to Cioran’s ‘despair’ (Cioran, 1997, 810; Farrugia, 2015, 214).7

As Keatinge’s suggestive piece indicates, however, such approaches founded on biography imply at least some sense of mutual influence on very tenuous grounds; what a study of Beckett and Cioran together can hope to achieve is simply to map out those ‘conjunctions’ which exist, and which can be enlightening for more informed future studies of either writer (Keatinge, 2013, 169). Further to Keatinge’s point, such ‘conjunctions’ also have something to say about the historical situation out of which both authors wrote and of which both were sensitively aware. Consideration of the ‘conjunctions’ between Beckett and Cioran provides nuanced context for their very similar writerly choices, as we shall see. What was it, in other words, that led Beckett to read La tentation soon after publication, to recommend it, at least in part, as ‘great stuff’, and to set himself enthusiastically to remember to reread Précis de décomposition?8

The issue of response to historical circumstance is integral to the moment when Beckett’s name was becoming more firmly linked to Cioran’s internationally, as the latter’s work began to be translated into English in the United States. Susan Sontag’s 1967 essay, ‘“Thinking against Oneself”: Reflections on Cioran’, had originally appeared as the ‘Introduction’ to Richard Howard’s version of The Temptation to Exist. The essay gained perhaps greater currency when Sontag included it in her 1969 collection Styles of Radical Will. Garnished with an epigraph from Beckett’s Three Dialogues, above one from the American composer John Cage, Sontag’s essay places Cioran within a European tradition of thinkers including Hegel, Kleist, and Nietzsche. For Cioran, she argues, the ‘mind is a voyeur’ of itself, not of the world. Here, ‘to a degree reminiscent of Beckett’, Cioran’s writings are ‘concerned with the absolute integrity of thought. That is, with the reduction or circumspection of

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7 Cioran’s response to Beckett’s displeasure, as relayed by Suzanne, was typically to discuss it with further friends in exile such as Henri Michaux, as Cahiers attests. In this instance, Cioran, as often, contrasted Beckett to Nietzsche’s ‘ridiculous’ ‘surhomme’, recognising the authentic ‘misère’ of Beckett’s characters who ‘ne vivent pas dans le tragique mais dans l’incurable’ [who don’t live amongst the tragic but amongst the incurable] (Cioran, 1997, 810).

8 It is important too that, when proposing to Bray that a selection of passages from Cioran be made in 1960, Beckett said that he found Cioran’s ‘aphorismes less interesting’ than his essays: neither Précis, La tentation, or 1960’s Histoire et utopie contained that section of aphorisms Cioran later included in his book publications. Beckett was perhaps also familiar, then, with the Syllogismes d’amertume, which Gallimard had published in 1952. Since both writers were knowledgeable or enthusiastic about earlier French aphorists, including La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort, as we shall see, Beckett’s alertness to and weighing of Cioran’s achievements in the genre resonate inevitably with aspects of his own achievement.
thought to thinking about thinking’ (Cioran, 1968, 14; Sontag, 1969, 80). After delineating a fuller version of this sense of intentlyness upon the process and mechanisms of thought, Sontag’s essay is notable, however, for the way it questions Cioran’s politics. She accuses Cioran of ‘moral insensitivity’ in his thinking about the twentieth-century history of the Jews in the essay ‘A People of Solitaries’ in The Temptation – an essay which falls ‘well below Cioran’s usual standard of [...] perspicacity’. Sontag, as a result, categorises his as a ‘right-wing “Catholic” sensibility’ and him as a ‘conservative’. For Sontag, Cioran ultimately remains ‘confined within the premises of the historicizing consciousness’ to which he was born, and was only partially able to ‘transvalue’ it successfully (Sontag, 1969, 86–7, 94). Cioran is unable, in other words, to achieve the new world freedoms of such as John Cage – the Beckett analogy is seemingly forgotten as Sontag develops her political theme.

On, as it were, his first introduction to anglophone audiences, the topic of Cioran’s extremely troubling politics, including his anti-Semitism, is (perhaps intuitively on Sontag’s part, perhaps not) to the fore. Cioran’s support for Hitler and Nazi ideology in the 1930s and through the Second World War is now uncontested and includes horrifying anti-Semitic outbursts in Romanian (Branco, 2019, 26–31). These views culminate in Cioran’s ultranationalist book Romania’s Transfiguration from 1936 and arguably lie in the background of later works such as the essay which perturbs Sontag.

How far Beckett might have been aware of Cioran’s 1930s–40s Fascist associations (which will be considered more fully in the next section), or of his anti-Semitic attitudes, beyond what he would have read in La tentation, must remain unclear. Ratifiable knowledge of Cioran’s politics was to become prevalent only later in France, at around the time of Cioran’s death (and after Beckett’s): this after Cioran had allowed Romania’s Transfiguration to be republished in 1991 in edited form (the chapter principally on the Jews was suppressed) in his native country and language with the fall of the Berlin Wall (Zarifopol-Johnson, 2009, 10). Outside of France, there seems to have been

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9 Eugene Thacker’s ‘Foreword’ to Howard’s translation underlines the personal association with Beckett, noting that Cioran ‘befriended’ the ‘playwright’ in post-War Paris, along with Henri Michaux and Gabriel Marcel (Cioran, 1968, 6).

10 Matei Caluescu has noted that the book is, though, both a product of and resistant to its own historical moment, claiming that it resists ‘the primitive, hysterical anti-Semitism’ of contemporary Romanian Fascism in projecting the Jewish people as ‘in every sense superior’ to the provincial outlook of the Romanians. But, controversially, on this account Cioran sees the Jews as not able to be assimilated to Romanian life (Caluescu, 1996, 206). Caluescu’s point is that the later French Cioran seeks to ‘unwrite’ these early views, but that they also perpetuate themselves (197). This troubling doubleness of thinking essentially marks the anti-Semitic tenor of that later essay ‘The People of Solitaries’, which seeks to valorise a ‘superior’ Jewish people as archetypal modern wanderers who have resisted most forms of Western decadence (Cioran, 2011, 317–19).