

## Introduction

### *Buddhism, Schopenhauer, Beckett: Influence, Affinity, Relay?*

On my asking Beckett how he goes about writing, his answer was unexpectedly brief: ‘One decides what elements to use and puts them together’.<sup>1</sup> Audiences and scholars of his work, hard put to keep up with Beckett’s erudition, have observed the extraordinary number of elements he stitches into his texts while taking care to conceal them, cast doubt on them, parody, or unravel them. In engaging with Beckett’s poetics of indirectness, exegetes have not failed to note the Buddhist threads that pervade his works.

Nevertheless, ‘I know nothing about Buddhism’, was Beckett’s response, when asked about Buddhist parallels in his 1957 mime *Acte sans paroles I / Act without Words I* (qtd. in Shainberg 1987, 111).<sup>2</sup> The query by the Buddhist wife and assistant of the puppeteer who staged a performance of the play in 1981 was no doubt based on the mime’s lone contemplative figure who, after being repeatedly flung from the wings into the blinding light of the play’s desert setting, ultimately resigns in the face of the whistled cues that frustratingly tempt him with objects arriving from the flies to relieve his suffering. These expedients, such as a small jug of water to satisfy his thirst and a rope to put an end to his existence, are whisked away just as the character is about to get hold of them. Ruby Cohn has pointed out that the French original *Acte sans paroles I* was first entitled *Soif* (thirst), and noting the comic effect of the clownlike figure’s pratfalls, she draws attention to the similarity of the mime with the myth of Tantalus whose punishment in Hades consists of Zeus frustrating his desire to quench his thirst (Cohn 2005, 218). Lance St. John Butler, on the other hand, sees the mime as one of several of Beckett’s parables for Martin Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit*, the ‘thrownness’ into ‘Being’

<sup>1</sup> See the account of my conversations with Beckett in Moorjani 2017, 41.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Shainberg, an American writer of fiction and nonfiction and a practitioner of Zen, recounts his meetings with Beckett in his 1987 memoir ‘Exorcising Beckett’.

(Butler 1984, 37–8). To the mime's scenario of a hellish existence, Beckett, however, added his character's contemplative response. In the brief written script of the mime (*CSPL* 43–6), the figure's reflections, receiving thirty-four mentions, are interrupted fifteen times by the shrill whistle misleadingly alerting him to material relief for his pains. At the end, ignoring the cues, he lies unmoving on his side, looking at his hands.

Encapsulated in this brief mime, if in skeletal form, one can in fact detect parallels to the four noble truths the Buddha taught in his first sermon shortly after attaining enlightenment: life is suffering; the cause is the craving thirst for sensual gratification, for perpetuation of the self, and for extinction; the way to end suffering is emancipation from craving; and the means include contemplation and resignation.<sup>3</sup> And yet, liberation from craving is also taught by the Upanishads, the ancient Sanskrit philosophical texts of which the most ancient predate Buddhism. And just to complicate matters further, the mime and its emphasis on suffering and its causes can also be understood in terms of Arthur Schopenhauer's thought, self-proclaimed to be congruent with that of the Buddha and the medieval mystical philosopher Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) (qtd. in App 2014, 25). It is no surprise, given Beckett's adeptness at secreting allusions into his texts, that after learning about Indian thought and Christian mysticism in his early reading of Schopenhauer and of works by and on Christian mystics, he picked up threads from all three philosophers to wind into his writings, inviting readers to take notice by leaving clues.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning with the elements of Beckett's texts that reverberate with Buddhist concepts, as is the case of his mime, this study probes his Eastern sources and its crosscurrents with related biblical and Christian teachings, mystical and otherwise. The similarities and differences noted between Buddhist concepts, on the one hand, and Upanishadic teachings and Christian mysticism, on the other, lead to the conclusion that, despite similar teachings of a path including resignation and meditation, their views on salvation set them apart, the Upanishads and Christian mysticism

<sup>3</sup> This description of craving follows the eminent Buddhologists and translators of Buddhist texts Rhys Davids 1910, 743; and Conze 1959a, 43.

<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, other Christian mystics, besides Eckhart, whose writings advocate a renunciation and quietism similar to that of the Buddha. Lack of space prevents the attention they deserve, which, however, is provided by other Beckett scholars to whom this study refers. To these, David Tucker adds the *Ethics* of seventeenth-century Flemish philosopher Arnold Geulincx, on which he draws to point out the apt resemblance of the figure of Beckett's mime to a puppet cruelly manipulated by an offstage puppet master (Tucker 2012, 162–5).

teaching a fulfilling union, the one with *brahman*, an eternal world principle, the other with divinity, in contrast to the Buddhist ultimate emptiness and unknowable beyond. Shared by Schopenhauer, the latter view is in consonance with Beckett's fascination with the void and his resolute 'perhaps' in the face of an 'unspeakable home' (*CSP* 258).

This study engages with both the Christian and Buddhist views as they emerge from Beckett's writings. They are alternate responses to the oft-evoked Beckettian 'woes' of the world. His distressing depictions of suffering reverberate with both biblical and Buddhist teachings, as evident, on the one hand, in his frequent allusions to the Christian iconography of the Passion, his evocations of Job, and the biblical teaching of the origin of guilt and suffering, but stopping short of the consolatory belief in a merciful God and Christian salvation, and, on the other hand, in the echoes in his oeuvre of the Buddha's meditations on the origin of suffering, karmic rebirth, and the path to an ineffable beyond. It is in order to understand Beckett's fascination with cyclical existence, the 'not I', timelessness, the 'unborn', and the void that led to this study's exploration of the congruence of his texts with Buddhist thought and its transmission by Schopenhauer.

This study's aim is not to fit Beckett into a Buddhist or mystical mold, but rather to scrutinize the imaginative dialogue between his writing and Indian thought and the apophatic, or negative, mysticism of which he became aware by reading Schopenhauer and books on and by mystical thinkers. It is a matter of transtextuality, or the scrutiny of relations between texts, overt or secret (Hutcheon 1985, 21), and the dialogue resulting from putting into relation texts issuing from several cultures.<sup>5</sup> Emphasis is therefore placed on tracking down the sources of Beckett's allusions to Buddhist and other philosophical and mystical concepts in verifiable extratextual and textual evidence. There were clearly traces of Buddhist influence in Beckett's postwar writings, and when, in his late works of the 1970s and 1980s and in the still later posthumous publication of his early fictions, Buddhist resonances called increasingly for investigation, the recent archival findings substantiating Schopenhauer's knowledge of Eastern thought – Buddhism in particular – coupled with the extraordinary revival of scholarly interest in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as well as enhanced access to Beckett's letters, archival notes and drafts set in motion

<sup>5</sup> Such intercultural dialogue is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of 'dialogism' and 'polyglossia' (Bakhtin 1981, 61, 282–3ff.).

this study's twenty-first-century reevaluation of the Buddhist echoes in Beckett's texts and their sources.

Beckett's Buddhist reverberations join the many other transtextual 'elements' that exegetes keep uncovering and exploring in the oeuvre of this omnivorous and receptive reader, despite his protests to the contrary. His 'can't and must' ethical approach to writing, explored in Chapter 4, encompassed forays into fields ranging from literature in his first language and the French and Italian literatures he majored in as an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin to readings in other ancient and modern European languages, some in the original, some in translation;<sup>6</sup> the Western philosophical tradition from the Presocratics to philosophers of his time; painting, film, theatre, music, and vaudeville; mathematics and the changing world views occasioned by the discoveries of the physical sciences; the new understanding of the human psyche and its and the body's ills by contemporaneous psychological, psychoanalytic, and medical investigations; historical traumas and repressions instigated by colonial powers, monstrous regimes, and world conflagrations, and the miseries and violence inflicted by the powerful on the less so; and the vast domains of mythological and religious writings, Western and beyond, including by such dissident groups as the Gnostics and, after reading Schopenhauer, engaging further with the Buddha's thought as evident from his citing Gautama's 'folle sagesse' (mad wisdom), a few years before the mime, in a postwar piece of art criticism in French (untranslated) that chimes with the postwar resurgence of interest by Western artists in Buddhist thought (*Dis* 146–7). (See Chapter 4.)

The transtextual contact with this wealth of material is shaped by what, in contemporary cognitive terms, the inheritors of the pragmatics of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) term the 'distributed cognition' between minds that occurs in the interpretation of a sender's externalized, or extended, signs into all forms of discourse and artefactual models. Emphasized in pragmatics is that understanding such discourse requires as a first step an overlap of contextual information between sender and receiver, the awareness of an author's cognitive environment thereby making accessible to readers elements that otherwise would remain opaque. To that end, this study engages at some length

<sup>6</sup> Born in 1906 in Foxrock, a prosperous Protestant suburb of Dublin, Beckett, as is well known, resided in Paris in 1928–30 and then permanently from 1937 to his death in 1989, accounting, in addition to his education, for his awareness of and engagement with political, cultural, and intellectual developments in France, while maintaining his Irish citizenship and interest in the Irish equivalents as well as in European and world affairs.

with the Eastern thinking and mystical, or spiritual, writings with which Beckett and other modernists of the times were intersecting.<sup>7</sup> In bringing their own cognitive and imaginative environment to such overlapping contexts, every new generation of readers creates different understandings of works such as those by Beckett, who invented techniques to leave much undetermined and open to recontextualization.

Because there has been a tendency in Beckett studies, although not universally shared, and contested by Beckett himself, to focus on finitude and exclude forms of transcendence (theistic or nontheistic) in his writing, this study counters this view by drawing attention to his reiterated explorations of a tentative 'beyond' and 'a way out' in his texts, drafts, letters, and conversations. Thus, in a 1960 letter, he speaks of resurrecting the Proustian 'ideal real', which he analyzed in his 1931 essay on Marcel Proust. For Beckett, in 1960, the writer's task to view 'the "real" of the human predicament' from an ideal and timeless vantage point remains valid. In his early essay, Beckett qualified the resulting 'ideal real' as a 'mystical experience' mingling finitude, or the empirical, with the ideal and the imaginative (*LSB III* 377; *P* 55, 56). (See Chapter 2.) Accordingly, in this study, Beckett's staging of finitude and the 'real' of human dramas, both outer and inner, is investigated along with his simultaneous timeless and imaginative viewpoint in affinity with the Buddha's and mystical thinking. In fact, Beckett consistently produced contrapuntal texts in which four dimensions simultaneously reverberate: the outer world with inner and other worlds concurrently with metareflection on the medium of transmission.<sup>8</sup>

Still adhering to the double vantage point of the 'ideal real' in the last decade of his life, Beckett confided that the excitement of writing for him was a combination of 'metaphysics and technique' (qtd. in Shainberg 1987, 134). Because the word 'metaphysics' startles, as it seemingly did Shainberg who asked for an explanation, Beckett replied that you have to draw on your own experience (134). In this regard, in his 1965 lectures inquiring into the possibility of metaphysics after the horrors of the

<sup>7</sup> On 'distributed cognition', see Magnani 2009, xiv, xv, 43–4. Further, the explorations of hypothesis formation by Lorenzo Magnani, a philosopher of cognition, help to engage with the current controversies in Beckett studies on the topic of hypothesis falsification. Counter Popperian neopositivistic rules, Magnani recommends the more current 'negation as falsification', in which hypotheses are discarded in favor of others that prove to be more explanatory when new information or discoveries come to light (Magnani 2009, 98, 415).

<sup>8</sup> Beckett drew on the ancient and Dantean fourfold method of exegesis in his 1929 essay on Joyce's future *Finnegans Wake* and in his 1931 lectures at Trinity College. For further details on Beckett's adaptation of this method, see Moorjani 2008, 123–5.

Holocaust, Hiroshima, and ongoing tortures, Theodor Adorno maintained that ‘the dramas of Beckett . . . seem to me the only truly relevant metaphysical productions since the war’ (Adorno 2000b, 117).<sup>9</sup> And that is, Adorno argues, because after the war ‘metaphysics has slipped into material existence’ in the form of wretched physicality (117). Similar to Beckett’s reaffirmation of the ‘ideal real’ merging the empirical and the ideal and imaginary, Adorno sees in Beckett’s postwar works the *mise en scène* of the decay and filth of finitude, on the one hand, and, on the other, the turning away from the traditional affirmative theses of metaphysics to the question of ‘what nothingness actually contains; the question, one might almost say, of a topography of the void’ (2000b, 135–6). For Adorno, metaphysics involves a thinking beyond one’s entrapment in finitude and language into an ‘openness’ (2000b, 68). Agreeing with Adorno, specialist in philosophical and political theory Anna-Verena Nosthoff finds behind the radical negativity in Beckett’s works ‘a metaphysical remainder’ corresponding to an open question (Nosthoff 2018, 49).

Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination* (2017) provides overwhelming evidence of Beckett’s actions protesting war, oppression, and torture in the political arena of his time and the imaginative ways he found of alluding indirectly to political terror in his writing. Once uncovered in this unsettling book, beyond what was already known, Beckett’s political engagement and allusions, which he kept hidden no less than the metaphysical, render increasingly comprehensible the necessity Beckett expressed for an elsewhere from which to contemplate, though not without humor, the ‘human predicament’ at its most hellish and unbearable.

Dialogue with other exegetes and thinkers who have wrestled with Beckett’s texts is an important part of this study in preparation for the new readings proposed. Additionally, the question of how much background to include for the anticipated readers of this book was a constant concern. Envisioned is a readership similar to the audience at the 2016 Samuel Beckett Summer School at Trinity College Dublin, consisting of undergraduate and graduate students and scholars of Beckett and other fields as well as nonacademic participants with varied backgrounds whose interest in Beckett led to their traveling from around the world to participate in the Trinity program. After my lecture on the topic, the

<sup>9</sup> Adorno’s transcribed and edited 1965 lectures on metaphysics at the University of Frankfurt were first published in 1998, followed by an English translation two years later.

interest this diverse audience expressed in further exploration of the relation between Beckett and Buddhism is the impetus behind this study.

This book, then, is intended for an academic and nonacademic audience intrigued by one of the most iconic writers of modernism and postmodernism and the extraordinary legacy and ongoing reverberations of his oeuvre across a global cultural field. The astonishing techniques Beckett invented to present his vision in prose, poetry, and drama in several media, which have already added to the global appeal of his creative works and their resonance in the performance and visual arts as well as the literary, will no doubt lead to further dramatic renewals in these domains. It can be anticipated that productions of Beckett's plays and adaptations of his work in other art forms, such as the one-act opera *Fin de partie* by György Kurtág, premiered in 2018 at La Scala, could increasingly be inflected by the new readings proposed in this study. Such was, for instance, the renewed attention paid to Richard Wagner's blending of Buddhist concepts into his operas under the influence of Schopenhauer, which resulted in the New York Metropolitan Opera's 2013 production of *Parsifal*, whose Canadian director François Girard was attentive to both the Christian and Buddhist intertexts serving to intensify the production's spiritual effects. That, for Beckett, such effects are desirable is evident in a number of comments he made about the arts, remarking, for instance, that Franz Schubert's music is 'more pure spirit than that of any other composer' (qtd. in Zilliacus 1976, 38) and commenting to Patrick Bowles: 'People are not in touch with their spirit. What counts is the *spirit*' (qtd. in Bowles 2006, 110; emphasis in the original). Similar effects can be anticipated in the ongoing affiliations of popular culture and new media with Beckett's oeuvre.<sup>10</sup>

Although there is much in this study to engage the attention of an audience alert to the exploration of religion in modernist/postmodernist texts, the book's primary focus is, rather than on the practice of religion, on the influence of the Buddha's thought and its interactions with other domains of religious and philosophical thinking. This study, then, aligns itself more closely with the philosophy of religion, the comparative history of thought, and the explorations of a nontheistic transcendence that Beckett shared with other modernist thinkers and artists under the tutelage

<sup>10</sup> See Paul Stewart and David Pattie's 2019 collection of articles, *Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture*.

of Schopenhauer's relay of Eastern thought.<sup>11</sup> Mindful of the interest of a broader audience in the East–West interconnections between Buddhist thought and comparative religious, literary, performance, and cultural studies, my concern was to make available the necessary contextual information for an engagement with the transtextual elements investigated throughout. As a result, unavoidably, readers acquainted with the fields under scrutiny may find more background information than they need, whereas nonspecialists in one or the other domain may wish for more. My aim was to adhere to a middle path of neither too much nor too little.

To return to Beckett's 'I know nothing about Buddhism', what is one to make of this declaration of ignorance? Knowing nothing is a claim frequently made by Beckett (and his creatures, often quite comically). At the time, for instance, of preproduction rehearsals of *En attendant Godot*, destined to become one of the most celebrated plays of the twentieth century, its author claimed that he knew nothing about the theatre (*LSB II* 316).<sup>12</sup> No doubt Beckett's knowing nothing can be understood in terms of the ignorance born of knowledge, the *docta ignorantia* of mystics and philosophers, including Buddhist thinkers. About Buddhism in *Act without Words I*, Beckett, however, tempered his assertion of ignorance by adding: 'If [Buddhism is] present in the play, it is unbeknownst to me.' In fact, that 'there had always been more in the work than he'd suspected was there' is an admission Beckett made, at age seventy-eight, to Shainberg on another occasion (Shainberg 1987, 133). The implication of unintentionally inscribed elements in creative work, which has always mystified writers, poets, and artists, and which is the subject of current investigations by philosophers and cognitive scientists, is probed in Chapter 6.

There are other possible ways of understanding Beckett's expression of ignorance and the 'unbeknownst to me'. 'Voluntary amnesia' is one scholar's alternative explanation for Beckett's protests of forgetfulness about the intertexts in his writings. Coining the terms 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' amnesia on the model of Proust's two types of memory, Thomas Cousineau argues that in order to deter scholars and audiences from focusing too exclusively on the sources he keeps hidden, Beckett makes use of voluntary amnesia to redirect attention to his own reshaping of the elements he chooses to echo (Cousineau n.d., n.p.). Similarly,

<sup>11</sup> See Professor of Philosophy and Religion Charlene Spretnak's *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art* (2014, chs. 4–6).

<sup>12</sup> *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), written in 1948–9, was first performed in Paris on 5 January 1953.



Beckett's future biographer James Knowlson had earlier detected Beckett's fear that audiences will by their attention to his sources be less engaged with his imaginative use of quotations for his own dramatic ends (Knowlson 1983, 23–4). In conversations in the early 1960s with Lawrence Harvey, however, Beckett admitted his tendency to proffer red herrings to his readers and audiences to put them off the trail: 'Of course, I say my life has nothing to do with my work, but of course it does' (qtd. in Harvey 2006, 136). Could it not be likewise, 'Of course, I say I know nothing about the theatre, about Buddhism, but of course I do'? Not to be excluded, though, is that the anxiety of influence contributed to the frequency with which Beckett denied his sources. Whatever the case may be, Beckett was protecting his art of indirectness and his crafty ways of misleading critics and readers to prevent his work from being tied down to ready meanings that put an end to dialogue with his work. This study is intended to prolong the dialogue.

If 'involuntary amnesia' is a possibility, Beckett's remark about knowing nothing about Buddhism coming twenty-five years after the work in question, it is highly unlikely, given obvious allusions to Eastern thought in between. His recognition of the significance attached to resignation in Eastern thinking, for instance, is apparent from the line in *Comment c'est / How It Is* (French, 1961; English, 1964), which is dictated to the fiction's narrating voice: 'an oriental my dream he has renounced I too will renounce I will have no more desires' (*How* 56). Moreover, Buddhist echoes have been identified not only in *Act without Words I* but in *Fin de partie* (1957; English *Endgame*, 1958) with which it was originally performed on a double bill and published in one volume. As a matter of fact, Beckett considered the mime a 'codicil' of sorts to the longer play, in which the characters Hamm and Clov are locked in a conflict of wills (*LSB III* 64). Frequently either directing *Fin de partie / Endgame* or assisting with its direction (in several languages), it is unlikely that Beckett would have forgotten the Buddhist echoes that sound throughout the play.

In his essay on *Fin de partie*'s Buddhist resonance, Emmanuel Jacquart contends that Hamm renounces at the end, as literally stated in the stage directions: '*Hamm renonce*', translated as '*Hamm gives up*' (*Fin* 110; *End* 82; Jacquart 1997, 36). Hamm comments as much by interrupting the story he is composing with the words: 'Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended' (*End* 83). Jacquart associates Hamm's renouncing with the Buddhist concept of a no-self, a fluctuating and illusory collection of physical and mental processes, whose emptiness corresponds to the emptying out at the

end of *Fin de partie*. Hamm, for him, follows Buddhism's teaching of detachment from the world and from the desires that make suffering inevitable (Jacquart 1997, 36). To these arguments one can add Hamm's 'moments for nothing' that suggest Buddhist emptiness and its paradoxical view of time, an absolute timelessness ('time was never') coexisting with the linear time of finitude ('time is over'). In the play, Hamm thus proceeds from his opening question – 'Can there be misery – (*he yawns*) – loftier than mine? No doubt'. (*End* 2) – to his renouncing and discarding his connections with the world. With all forms of life, sustenance, and comfort depleted in the shelter or refuge in the skull, Hamm throws away his remaining possessions, his gaff, stuffed dog, and whistle of command. Hamm's gesture resonates with Schopenhauer's denial of the will to life, which, for him, precedes a *nirvāṇa*-like liberation from existence. (See Chapters 1 and 2.)

Unbeknownst or not to the author, audiences and critics have caught Buddhist resonances in both the mime and the play it follows as a codicil. Suggesting an echo that could be both Eastern and Christian Quietist, Beckett explained to Ernst Schroeder, who played Hamm in the 1967 Berlin production under Beckett's direction, that Hamm and Clov 'are both focused on quiet and inner contemplation, but one of them is always disturbing the other' (qtd. in McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988, 238). As we have seen, such is also the case in *Act without Words I*, in which the contemplation of the figure, identified by Beckett as 'Clov thrown into the desert' (qtd. in *LSB III* 65, n. 3), is continuously disturbed by whistled interruptions.<sup>13</sup> Further, the desert setting of Beckett's mime recalls the increasingly barren setting of *Endgame* as well as Schopenhauer's musings on the feelings of the sublime evoked by the vastness of deserts eclipsing human interests (*WWR I* § 39, 228). In this sense, 'Clov thrown into the desert' echoes Hamm's lines in *Endgame*: 'you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe' or 'a speck in the void' (*End* 36). (For Beckett's adoption of the trope of the desert as a figure of emptiness, see the discussion of *Le Dépeupleur* / *The Lost Ones* in Chapter 5.)

Was it perhaps similarly voluntary amnesia and/or the anxiety of influence when 'unbeknownst to me' was Arthur Schopenhauer's claim about the influence of Buddhism on his major work *The World as Will and Representation* when it was first published in 1818, a claim coming, like Beckett's, a quarter of a century after composition of the work in question?

<sup>13</sup> In the earlier novel *Murphy*, the eponymous character is similarly interrupted while in a meditative trance (*Mu* ch. 1).