

THE GIRL: FEMININITY, COMING OF AGE, AND THE LIMITS OF
BECOMING

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Carissa Renee Sims

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Carissa Renee Sims, Ph. D.

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The present dissertation argues for a theory of a properly feminine *Bildungsroman*, one that moves feminine subjectivity beyond the impasses of becoming and reconceives it within what I call “a logic of the event.” I call into question prevailing theories of femininity that treat it as an unstable term such that any subject inhabiting the feminine position is caught in a never-ending enactment of the term’s failure. As a result, within this framework, the feminine subject is seen as always becoming but, as Joan Copjec has pointed out, never is. I contend with Copjec that these accounts reduce femininity to the realm of the signifier; in other words, femininity is only considered in its signifying capacity. While these theories are certainly necessary in a critique of the social where a hypostatization of the feminine can result in brutal oppressiveness, I claim that they are ultimately inadequate to an account of feminine subjectivity. Instead, reading him in relation to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the feminine not-all, I see in Alain Badiou’s theory of the event a more adequate means of responding to the conceptual exigencies that feminine subjectivity poses. Drawing on Badiou’s articulation of the event as a momentary failure of what “is,” one which opens the possibility for a subjective intervention that, through a laborious process, produces a new truth, I propose a new way of conceiving feminine subjectivity. I identify such a logic of the event at work in certain novels about the adolescent girl from the latter half of the twentieth century. By analyzing Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding*, Carmen Boullosa’s *Antes*, and Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant*, I demonstrate how these novels stage a problem for the girl which a logic of becoming cannot adequately address: the difficulty of signifying a certain something that has been left unaccounted for in the realm of meaning.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dr. Sims completed her B.A. at the University of Texas at Austin in 1999. She majored in English and minored in French Literature. After time spent in Morocco, she began her graduate studies in 2001 at Cornell. After receiving her Masters in Comparative Literature in 2004, she moved to France to conduct research.

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PREFACE

TOWARDS A FEMININE *BILDUNG*

The present work seeks to articulate a theory for a feminine *Bildungsroman*. Such an undertaking works with categories—gender and genre (etymologically the same word)—that are considered to be, if not invalid, irredeemably troubled. The goal is not to reestablish them as untroubled, but my engagement does proceed from the wager that gender and genre are not empty of utility. In his canonical essay “La loi du genre” (1986), Jacques Derrida asserts that texts cannot but *participate* in genres (even if they cannot belong to them): “il n’y a pas de texte sans genre,” he writes (264). It is Derrida’s hypothesis that genres function to generate the horizon on which literature itself comes into view; without generic designations, we would not speak of “literature.” Yet these designations do not foreclose participation: they make it possible. Speaking of the designation “novel,” Derrida writes: “Il rassemble le corpus et du même coup, du même clin d’œil il l’empêche de se fermer, de s’identifier à lui-même. Cet axiome de non-fermeture ou d’incomplétude croise en lui la condition de possibilité et la condition d’impossibilité d’une taxinomie” (265).

Derrida’s reading of how genres function allows for a critical use of them that draws on their generative capacity. Thus, my use of *Bildungsroman* will stray from the traditional one even as it remains within the key conceptual horizon inaugurated by the genre’s initial articulations. In turn, the *Bildungsroman* posited here may go on to designate texts that differ greatly from the novels I will treat here. But I do not situate my project as a generic one because I can, because generic designations have a plasticity to them, but because the *Bildungsroman* as genre (or perhaps more accurately *subgenre*) deals with the protagonist’s becoming. In his consideration of the *Bildungsroman*, Mikhail Bakhtin identifies this theme as its primary

problematic:

It is necessary, first of all, to single out specifically the aspect of man's essential becoming. The vast majority of novels (and subcategories of novels) know only the image of the ready-made hero. [...] Along with this predominant, mass type, there is another incomparably rarer type of novel that provides an image of man in the process of becoming. As opposed to a static unity, here one finds a dynamic unity in the hero's image. The hero himself, his character, becomes a variable in the formula of this type of novel. Changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed. [...] This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human emergence.¹ (20-21)

In his extraction of a shared problematic from the novels identified as *Bildungsromane*, Bakhtin gives to the genre an elastic specificity: it is when the novel primarily represents a subject's becoming, emergence, development. Taking as given that one may use the category of "novel," my intervention comes in putting pressure on the other terms that surface in Bakhtin's definition, namely *subject* and *becoming*. For the moment, I would like simply to suggest that the suppleness of these two terms plays considerably in the genre's history and in the history of its criticism. It is because there is a history (and a future) to our notions of *subject* and of *becoming* that there is a history (and a future) to the *Bildungsroman*. I will shortly return to this history.

Generic designations are useful then in that they can be productive (and not reductive), allowing a non-possessive participation that permits texts to do things they otherwise might not.

¹ The translators note: "The Russian here is *stanovlenie*, a word Bakhtin uses early and late in his career. It is closer to the German *das Werden* (becoming): the process of development that is never complete in the life course of an individual. It is Bakhtin's way of insisting that identity is never complete but always in process. Where possible it has been rendered in English as 'becoming,' but where this is too barbarous the word 'emergence' has been used." (55)

The *Bildungsroman*'s utility lies in its allowing a novel to participate in notions of subjective becoming. It is in this capacity that I evoke the *Bildungsroman* to propose a *feminine* variant of the process it posits and brings into view. If I term this variant "feminine," it is not to reinstate the word in any traditional sense. I take to heart the incisive and thorough critiques mounted by feminists and gender theorists who have shown that the term invariably fails when it is used to speak for all women or to fix a womanly essence. Moreover, I acknowledge the ethical demand and share the political project that motivates queer theorists such as Judith Butler, who calls for a reworking of norms so that we can recognize the subjectivity of those who fall outside of the current interpretive matrices that make "a viable life" (*Contingency* 148). Similar to Derrida's conception of genre, my use of "feminine" is meant to be productive of participation; thus, it admits those who do not see themselves as or are not seen as women, but it does draw on those who do see themselves as and are seen as women.

It is my contention that Jacques Lacan's theory of femininity allows for such a move: one can speak of women, but derive from them a principle that is not specific to women. The following chapter will more fully address these theories, but, for the moment, I will specify that psychoanalysis posits that sexual difference is determined by the position one assumes in relation to what Lacan calls the signifier of desire and later the phallic function. If the two positions that result from the work of the (sexual) signifier on the body have traditionally been articulated (culturally and theoretically) in heterosexist terms, we currently, particularly in North America, are living in a period when these two positions no longer function in traditional ways. As one Lacanian scholar has written: "Today in North America, gender roles have changed to such a degree that it is certainly not only women who can be considered to be in the feminine position..." (Klement). The cultural changes we have known in all domains of sexual relations,

morphologies, and identities demand that the insights into sexual difference provided by psychoanalysis be rearticulated,² for these insights tell us more about what it is to be a sexed being due to symbolic formations than what it is simply to be a man or a woman. Joan Copjec nicely suggests this when she writes:

If one accepts that sex divides and singularizes the subject, one needs to say why one continues nevertheless to insist on the two of sexual difference. My answer is this: every subject experiences the enigma of his/her divided, singular, sexuated being from one or the other side of the symbolic tear, from the side of the void or the side of the symbolic. The difference in these positions gives rise to the distinct forms through which the enigma takes shape. (“Fable” 10)

Removed from gender specific language, the sexed positions made possible by psychoanalytic reflections reveal themselves to point to a problem that has little to do with gender or men and women as these terms are more widely understood.

At the same time, because psychoanalysis allows us to see in our sexed beings the expression of a problem with and a subjective response to the symbolic and not simply the effect of biopower, of regulatory norms, it offers a compelling critical tool to think about more traditional representations of man/woman in ways that preserve the subjective dimension of those who participate in them and “the symbolic tear” that they inscribe. In other words, psychoanalysis allows us to think femininity, for example, as something that neither needs to be critiqued away (as oppressive norm) nor celebrated (as subversive of the established order). Rather, it gives us a theoretical space for thinking about a subjective position that relates to the

² Tim Dean has written convincingly that Lacan’s work cannot be read as a monolithic, internally coherent body; as such, it resists systemization and is inherently open to revision. See “How to Read Lacan” in *Beyond Sexuality*.

impossibility of *complete* (sexual) existence or representation in the symbolic field—a cultural position that has historically been occupied by women.³ “Feminine,” then, derives its usefulness in that it allows us to talk not about a cultural norm but an effect that arose (and arises) in women’s positioning in alterity and in the sexually marginalized.

As a position that one assumes, femininity is no more innate than gender norms; from a psychoanalytic perspective, one also is not born but becomes a woman. But if the woman that one becomes is neither “the repeated stylization of the body” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43) or a legal designation or a feminine identity, how does one take up this position? My hypothesis is that because all subjective emergence occurs in a sexed position (no matter how non-normative), the *Bildungsroman* is a cultural locus where the assumption of one’s sexed position is marked, pointed to—perhaps a symbolic practice where the emergence of sexual difference surfaces. In reading girls’ coming of age novels through the conceptual matrices offered by the *Bildungsroman* and the psychoanalytic theory of the feminine subject, I suggest that both undergo a turn of the screw which allows a new vision of the *Bildungsroman* and a new conceptual logic for feminine subjectivity.

***Bildungsroman*: The Genre Which Is Not One**

Critics tend to agree that Wilhelm Dilthey, the German philosopher who would have an influence on the young Martin Heidegger, is to be credited with giving the *Bildungsroman* life. As one Germanist scholar of the genre, Manfred Engel, explains:

Dilthey used and defined the term for the first time in his biography *Das Leben Schleiermachers* (The Life of Schleiermacher, 1870), but a broader reception did not start until the appearance of his much more popular collection of essays entitled *Das Erlebnis*

³ The impossibility of a complete symbolic existence is sexual.

und die Dichtung (Poetry and Experience) in 1905. (263)

It is here, in an essay on Friedrich Hölderlin, that Dilthey lays out the contours of the genre with, as Engel puts it, these “well-known sentences”:

Hyperion is one of the *Bildungsromane* which reflect the interest in inner culture that Rousseau had inspired in Germany. [...] Beginning with *Wilhelm Meister* and *Hesperus*, they all portray a young man of their time: as he enters life in a happy state of naivete, seeking kindred souls, finds friendship and love, how he comes into conflict with the hard realities of the world, how he grows to maturity through diverse life experiences, finds himself, and attains certainty about his purpose in the world. Goethe’s goal was the story of a person preparing himself for an active life [...] (335)

In such a description, the non-specialist recognizes, outside perhaps the specific works mentioned, the general outlines of what has come to be understood in the English departments of American universities as the *Bildungsroman*. For the non-specialist it most often gets equated with novels which take as their theme a protagonist’s coming of age, growing up, becoming acquainted with “the way of the world” and joining it, to borrow a turn of phrase from Franco Moretti. This is most likely due to Jerome Buckley’s seminal work *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), the work that most fully anchored the term in contemporary English literary studies.⁴ There he remarks: “I now use the label in its broadest sense as a convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship” (13). Buckley’s synonymic use of the term itself points to an already existing “common usage [of it] as a handy designation for any novel that ‘has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person’” (Boes 231). Tobias Boes in his essay “Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A

⁴ According to Tobias Boes, the “first English academic work on the subject, Susanne Howe’s *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen*, appeared in 1930” (231).

Historical Survey of Critical Trends,” asserts that the term made its way into the English language during the Edwardian era when there was an “interest in the writings of German thinkers such as Freud, Weber or Simmel” (231). Thus, not soon after its appearance in critical discussions within Germany, the term appears in English and functions to name novels (of any language) that treat an individual’s organic and spiritual formation—however those terms are conceived.

However, Germanists are not so loose with the application of the term. Jeffrey Sammons and Manfred Engel, for example, argue that *Entwicklungsroman* (development novel) or indeed the English designation “novel of development” are more appropriate for what English speakers mean to designate by *Bildungsroman*. Despite Dilthey’s description seeming to talk about a theme and plots that appear highly recognizable and portable outside an eighteenth-century German context, many specialists of the genre insist on the specificity of the *Bildung*, that is, *formation*, represented in the novels he cites. Sammons argues that *Bildung* denotes “the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity” (“Nonspecialists” 41). As such it denotes more than “merely the accumulation of experience, [...] merely maturation in the form of fictional biography” (41); it functions within the “intensely bourgeois” ideology “about the autonomy and relative integrity of the self, its potential self creative energies, its relative range of options within material, social, even psychological determinants” (42). Engel agrees that the genre is “inseparably linked to the idea of modern individuality” but also “to the awareness that the structures of modern society tend to threaten or thwart the development of a harmonious personality. This anti-modernist impulse is the very origin and *raison d’être* of the genre” (266). Other scholars point to the specific history of *Bildung* (in the figurative sense) in

German culture. It draws on medieval Rhineland mysticism's idea of *bilden* (to form, to mold). If the verb "originally signified God's creation of human beings in His image (*Bild*)," it undergoes a signifying transformation when mystics such as Meister Eckhardt incorporated "elements of Plotinus' philosophy of emanation and reintegration to it":

the Universal Spirit (*nous, Weltseele*), which emanated from the Creator and was present in all beings, became tainted through its contact with bodily matter and thus had to be purified before it could be integrated with the Creator. Plotinus describes the entire process as an "odyssey," during which an individual must "sculpt away impurities" until the soul becomes a "work of art," or virtuous by attaining self-recognition (*gnothi seauton*). Referring to this sculpture metaphor, the mystics called such introspection *bilden*. (Cocalis 400)

Originally, then, *Bildung* (or rather the etymon *Bild*) differs distinctly from its later significations in that it denotes a turning away from the world—a cultivation of the "self" not through an interaction with the social but through a chiseling away of the world so that self (dis)integrates into God. In other words, lurking behind *Bildung*'s "intensely bourgeois" connotations of the autonomous self, is the paradoxical notion that the self must actively work to lose itself.⁵ The self must work to allow the Other to be—to echo a Freudian phrase. The Other, however, that the self must give way to changes in the 17th century when Pietists "equated *bilden* with *lernen* and conceived of it as both an aesthetic and an organic process" (400). Here the virtuous self is conceived of as an end product of a seed being planted and cultivated; the

⁵ Sammons in his seminal article "The Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*, or: What Happened to Wilhelm Meister's Legacy?" describes this process as *Entbildung* (disforming or unforming). (See page 234.) However, Wolfgang Wackernagel in his study of the term argues that it is only rarely used and that the distinction between *Bildung* and *Entbildung* is slippery in the works of Meister Eckhart who introduced the term. See *Ymagine Denudari: Ethique de l'image et métaphysique de l'abstraction chez Maître Eckhart*.

formation of the self becomes explicitly tied to the production of the Other of religious and social norms. By the 18th century, *Bildung* becomes widely used to talk about the education of moral young men (*virtuoso*) through the arts. In a fascinating essay entitled “The Transformation of *Bildung* From an Image to an Ideal,” Susan Cocalis maps the rise of *Bildung* as “a major issue in German intellectual life” in the eighteenth century (403). She identifies the translation of the Earl of Shaftesbury’s (Anthony Ashley Cooper) treatise on the education of “the moral artist” entitled *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (first published in 1711 with reprints in 1713 and 1732) as the beginning of a non-religious conception of *Bildung*. The English ideas of “inward form,” “formation of a genteel character,” and “good breeding” all are rendered in the German by *Bildung* (*innere Bildung*, *Bildung*, *Selbstbildung* respectively). In the German context, these notions become attached to the Greek ideal of *kalogagathia*, the ideal person who combines the beautiful and the good, and become the basis for a new educational program. Cocalis notes: “In contrast to Shaftesbury, however, who was writing from an aristocratic standpoint about the education of young gentlemen, the Germans extended the scope of *Bildung* to include the middle class” (403).

Exposed to Shaftesbury’s idea that through exposure to the breadth of human culture (particularly through travel and interaction with the world) an ideal, moral man is formed, German thinkers began to imagine how to put his ideas into practice. Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, called on the state to create “[m]useums, art galleries, libraries, archives, and concert halls” for “the general public” (406). With this in place, youths from all social classes “could be exposed to the various histories, languages, arts, and cultures of the European nations, as was dictated by the original concept of *Bildung* [in Shaftesbury], without having to leave the German states” (406). To return to an earlier formulation, in this version of *Bildung*, the Other to

which the self gives way is the cultural. In other words, *Bildung*, at the time when the founding novels of the genre were written, refers to a (wealthy) youth's passage through an experience, to put it most generally, of the cultural realm to become "ennobled." In the most widely accepted instance of the first *Bildungsroman*—Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*—the protagonist, a merchant's son, joins a traveling theatre troupe where he grapples with *Hamlet* and encounters various people before being plucked from this dubious social milieu by the secretive but aristocratic Tower Society. This notion of *Bildung* survives in the American concept of a liberal arts education which is meant to form a well-rounded thinker, or, as we used to say, a well-rounded person. The ideological underpinnings which allow us to equate the study of the liberal arts with the formation of the noble "critical thinking skills" and the ideal citizen, i.e., humanely and critically engaged, stretch from eighteenth-century Germany (Sammons 41).

In the nineteenth century, *Bildung* became institutionalized in school curricula. The artistically inclined, contemplative young man of means for whom *Bildung* had originally been conceived gave way to the aspirational university student intent on success. Cocalis argues that eventually *Bildung* came to be viewed as "symbolic of some vague 'totality of being' that is used to affirm the status quo" (407). Whereas *Bildung* is often spoken of as supporting ideas of wholeness, self-awareness, the *gebildete Mensch* (educated man), Cocalis takes the unorthodox view that the process it designates is ongoing, structured as it is by "continual self-purification" and "sustained achievement" (409). The temporal disjunct between the critical naming of the *Bildungsroman* in 1905 and the novels it names (written at the end of the eighteenth century) introduced a conceptual dissonance between the object and the genre at the latter's moment of institutional birth. Be that as it may, following Dilthey's lead, German scholars "occupied themselves with differentiating between ever finer gradations of *Bildung*" and praising it as "the

German answer to ‘decadent’ French and English ‘novels of society’” (Boes 232). After the Second World War, the genre went into decline as it was critiqued “as indicative of the German *Sonderweg*, the separate path into modernity that had led the country towards fascism” (233).

The genre fell into further trouble when in 1961 archival research revealed that Dilthey was not the first to designate and theorize it. Fritz Martini found that an “obscure Romantic critic Karl Morgenstern (1770-1852), who held a professorship in aesthetics at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu in Estonia) and gave two long lectures on the topic in 1819 and 1820” (233).⁶ This prompted an emptying of the genre, in which Sammons and Cocalis (quoted above) participate. According to Boes, Sammons’s essay “The Mystery off the Missing *Bildungsroman*, or: What Happened to Wilhelm Meister’s Legacy” (1981) is the most succinct articulation in English of what is at stake in this move. In short, the notion of the *Bildungsroman* as having a “continuous history [would be] a critical a hoax” that needed to be rectified (233). If there were such a thing as a *Bildungsroman*, it was not what anybody understood it to be. Sammons insists that the first and only instances of the genre reflected a “fundamental optimism” born of the Enlightenment about the world being able to accommodate the innate “potentialities” of the self (232-33).

The Female Bildungsroman

If Germanists tended to reduce what could qualify as a *Bildungsroman*, preferring to tether it to a specific national historical moment, scholars of English literature opened the genre up.⁷ Feminists particularly became interested in the concept of *Bildung* to study how female

⁶ Martini’s essay can be found in English in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (1991), edited by James Hardin. Boes translated one of Morgenstern’s lectures entitled “On the Nature of the Bildungsroman”; it appears in *PMLA*, Vol. 124, No. 2, March 2009.

⁷ One of the major theorizations of the *Bildungsroman* as a European phenomenon is Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World*. Here Moretti argues that the genre appears at the beginning of

novels of development figured the impossibility or difficulty of completing *Bildung* for women under patriarchal social structures. As Carol Lazarro-Weiss writes:

When the term entered the ranks of feminist criticism in the 1970s, it proved most useful in analyzing the ways in which nineteenth- and early twentieth century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms. According to Annis Pratt, the female *Bildungsroman* demonstrates how society provides women with models for “growing down” instead of “growing up,” as is the case in the male model. (17)

Admittedly, their use of *Bildung* would seem wildly inappropriate to some Germanists, but the meaning of the term has taken on a life of its own in English. As Boes explains, in response to Jerome Buckley’s work on the genre, the first major feminist theorization of the female *Bildungsroman* was *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983). In this anthology, scholars considered twentieth-century texts in the manner introduced by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*: they looked for a “submerged plot, which encodes rebellion” (12). Another major work that theorizes the female *Bildungsroman* as a site of social critic is Susan Fraiman’s *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993). Fraiman reads Victorian novels—*Evalina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Mill On the Floss*—as critical of cultural norms of becoming women, drawing out the necessity of self-sacrifice, self-effacing, and suicide that structure their plots. In her book *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, Esther Labovitz argues that the female *Bildungsroman* only appears in the twentieth century when a life in the world, i.e., outside the home, became imaginable for women.

modernity in order to give a symbolic figure to the new era. Youth would embody and valorize the necessary changes that European states were experiencing.

Another strain of feminist criticism of the *Bildungsroman* instead attempted to redefine the notion of *Bildung*, one that would fit it into women's field of experience. Lorna Ellis, for example, in *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman*, argues that "'growing down' paradoxically enables 'growing up'" (18). She continues:

These two forms of growth are part of the same process, and deciding whether to call a glass half full or half empty, both descriptions are accurate, but neither tells the whole story. By teaching their protagonists how to understand and work within the limits of their societies, authors of female *Bildungsromane* allow their heroines to mature or "grow up"—to understand themselves and their relationship to their environment, and to negotiate that environment in order to maintain some form of agency. (18)

The female *Bildungsroman* would be then a story of confronting and working within the limits imposed on women to achieve an autonomous self. In the same vein, Joanna Frye's *Living Stories, Telling Lives* presents the argument that the girl "challenges the idea of a coherent feminine self that a patriarchal society attempts to impose upon women by representing the protagonist engaged in multiple roles and formulating multiple self-definitions" (Lazarro-Weis 18). Through this identification with several roles, the girl manages to create another identity that would be her own. More recent work on the female *Bildungsroman* might also be said to participate in this logic. In her book on women living in the margins, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, Stella Bolaki writes, "it would be a mistake to see the texts as failed or counter-*Bildungsromane*. They go against some of the fundamental assumptions of the genre but also gesture towards their own 'art of living.' Therefore, their subversive potential should not be seen merely in relation to the deviation from the genre's formal conventions" (13). Here the potentialities of the self, the

purported guiding idea for Goethe in his founding of the genre, find their new expression in the self's individual "art of living."

In her critical assessment of the female *Bildungsroman*, Carol Lazarro-Weiss suggests that "most critics who use the term female *Bildungsroman* view it as one of the last bastions for the defense of an experientially-based feminist critique, one based on the belief in the possibility and necessity of the representation in writing of women's experience and with the goal of finding a new definition of female identity" (19). In the wake, however, of deconstructionist critiques of identity and the category of woman, this stance has fallen out of vogue. Lazarro-Weiss's own position, developed in the pre-gender studies world of the late 1980s, resembles to a great extent the theoretical moves that would come to characterize that discipline. Drawing on Teresa De Laurentis's redefinition of experience as "the process by which subjectivity is constructed," "a process of signification" (qtd in Lazarro-Weiss 22), Lazarro-Weiss argues that female *Bildungsromane* allow us to see "self and identity [...] as a series of shifting positions within specific material and discursive contexts" that neither let us speak of an essential female experience nor let us divorce it from its specificity. In other words, we can speak of a female experience but only if we understand it as an historically situated "process of signification." With this approach, the genre brings to the fore the constructedness of cultural ideologies concerning feminine subjectivity and their "constant[...] need of revision" (33).

As a means to further the political and ideological agenda of feminists and gender theorists, Lazarro-Weiss's reading strikes me as useful. To the extent that women are constituted as subjects through a process of signifying practices circumscribed by specific social contexts, an attention to that process can highlight and subvert the practices that serve to reify a female identity. My reading, however, attends to the subject that cannot be reduced to signifying

practices—to a “series of shifting positions” or “multiple identifications”: the subject of femininity that psychoanalysis posits. This is not to deny the socially determined aspect of female identity, but it is to read with an otherly seeing lens which looks at moments of the text that from a feminist or gender theorist lens might appear inconsequential.

Bildung and Psychoanalysis

Of course, mine is not the first attempt to articulate a psychoanalytic theory of *Bildung*. In 1987, the Germanist scholar John H. Smith proposed a psychoanalytic account of *Bildung* as it occurs in the first examples of the *Bildungsroman*. In his essay “Cultivating Gender: Sexual Difference, *Bildung*, and the *Bildungsroman*,” Smith argues that psychoanalysis provides the means for constructing “an abstract analytical tool applicable to an indefinitely large array of texts”; in so doing, the grounds of the debate and genre inclusion considerably shifts. No longer does the *Bildungsroman* illustrate for us the individual’s ability or inability to flower in the social, but, through Smith’s lens, the individual’s entry into the “Symbolic Order” where desire is mediated and subjected to what Lacan calls “Le Nom-du-Père.”

Smith contends that what is at stake in the concept of *Bildung* is best articulated by Hegel who sees it as a “rhetorico-pedagogical” process and not “an organic-morphological one” (211). “*Bildung* involves not growth or integration but neohumanist training and a mastery of social forms in which the self simultaneously alienates and represents itself according to laws governing desire” (212).⁸ Smith then turns to Lacan to demonstrate that the concept of *Bildung* is

⁸ Smith points to three occurrences in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that rely on the notion of *Bildung*. Hegel speaks about the book itself as “a process of ‘Bildung’” in the *Vorrede*. In the discussion of the master-slave dialectic, he uses the verb ‘(sich) bilden’ to describe the “process [through work and language] that leads by means of the slave’s self-alienation to the recognition and desire of the Other and thus to a split self-consciousness and the fulfillment of the self’s desire” (211). And lastly, in the chapter entitled “The Self-Alienated Spirit. *Bildung*.” Hegel terms the “process whereby the individual alienates himself from himself [...] in order to

structurally gendered. Smith reads the movement charted in Hegel's *Bildung* within the framework of Lacan's theory of the formation of the Oedipal subject. In his reading of Lacan, the individual initially "oscillates between fulfillment and impoverishment" because his desires are tied to the imagined desire of the Other (as with the master and slave seeking recognition from each other) (214). In this Imaginary realm, the Other is perceived as being able to fulfill the individual's desire. Here desire is always the desire of the Other to the extent that the irreducible lack that is desire is averted through wanting what the Other wants. But this also leaves the individual exposed to the lack in the Other and thus to an absence of his own fulfillment. To interrupt this repetition of presence/absence of the object that is dependent on the Other, a third term must come into play between the Self and Other (214). The introduction of the symbolic through "Le Nom-du-Père," enjoins the subject to

socially regulate his desire of the (m)other and bow to the "no" of the father in order to gain entry into the patriarchal domain symbolized by the patronym. In giving up the (m)other he internalizes the new essential lack (desire of the Other) and adopts a painful and powerful position that mediates objects through a patriarchal signifying system. The individual is thus set on a trajectory, the end position of which [...] is a [...] patriarchal language that controls the individual's desire even as it leaves him torn, alienated, symbolically castrated. (214)

Smith's reading of Lacan's account of the subject's entry to the mediating effects of the symbolic rightly brings to the foreground its often overlooked enabling function. Even as it, in one sense, breaks the illusion of the possibility of fulfillment, it also protects the individual from an invasive experience of the capricious (m)Other, supporting the subject in the regulating of his

master and reinternalize [through language] the artificial forms that make up his apparently 'other' world" (211).

desires and making his own desire a possibility. The price, however, for this “self-expression” is the assumption of and alienation within the various positions designated by the symbolic and a concomitant repression of the desire of/for the Other.

Smith argues that Lacan’s account allows us to see the gendered nature of the “properly” desiring individual within a patriarchal social order: he must be male in order to fully participate in the symbolic and thus to be sufficiently alienated within representations of the self and thereby from the desire of the Other (implicitly coded as female). Thus, for Smith, *Bildung* describes “not just developing into a social being by mastering society’s language but adopting a *male* position within the patriarchy” (215). He continues: “In our terms, male *Bildung* proceeds toward language, in its own representation, opposed to a ‘different (nonpatriarchal) voice,’ by accepting the socially recognized and organized projection of the Other” (216).

This leads Smith to “argue that the strict gender codification at the basis of *Bildung*, taken in its historical context, makes female *Bildung* a contradiction in terms” (220). Since, in Smith’s reading, *Bildung* is about the accession to cultural and linguistic formations that “depends on and excludes the female voice as the Other,” the application of the concept to female narratives is falsely premised on the universality of *Bildung*. For Smith, the incompatibility between female narratives and *Bildung* demands that this “dominant developmental pattern” be challenged (221). Hence, he proposes that the predominance in women’s narratives of “novels of awakening” which often end in death are perhaps one hint at another process of formation, but one which founders in the current “patriarchal structures of representation” (221). Smith ends his essay on the hopeful note that once the accepted notion of *Bildung* is emptied of its “supposed universality,” “a new concept of *Bildung* [...] appropriate to the radical Otherness of much women’s writing” could begin to take shape (221).

Smith critiques, for example, the kinds of readings that feminist had thus far given of female narratives of development because they seek to replicate women's trajectories within the mold of masculine *Bildung*: they read too with an eye to see how women succeed at becoming part of the world, discovering themselves, or finding self-fulfillment—or indeed how they fail at doing so (221). I would suggest that as long as *Bildung* is conceived in terms of the production or failure of self-consciousness, a socially recognized subject, a self-regulating I, it stays within the conceptual parameters of the masculine *Bildung* and thus fails to imagine the possibility of other modes, other logics of development with which the individual is engaged. But, while I agree with Smith that conceptions of the female *Bildungsroman* do not always rise to the challenge that the texts present, I think his reading of Lacan's theory of the Oedipal subject is open to revision. To the extent that gender roles have evolved such that women are nowadays increasingly allowed access to the patriarchal "structure of representation," one might rightly wonder how adequate anatomy is to indicate an individual's accession to that structure. While I do not mean to suggest that men and women's experience of these structures are the same, I do recognize that "structures of representation" change.⁹

Smith's account does, however, bring into focus the challenge that female *Bildungsromans* presented to literary theorists: how to conceive of another logic of formation. If the masculine (which I do not strictly equate to male) model has centered around the Oedipal

⁹ I also am not claiming that men and women's experience are necessarily different. They could or could not be. My concern here is not whether there are female and male (or indeed intersexed) ways of experiencing symbolic representation, but whether anatomical sex or gender identifications adequately function to indicate an individual's *relation* to the symbolic order, that is, whether one "experiences the enigma of his/her divided, singular, sexuated being from one or the other side of the symbolic tear, from the side of the void or the side of the symbolic." Where the symbolic situates the void of sexuality appears to be changing; it admits of more and more "others" in its representational repertoire. The symbolic function of anatomy appears to be changing.

problems of imposed entry into the symbolic (Le Nom-du-Père) where one embarks on a journey of constructing the self, then it is perhaps not so much in the dynamics of an imposed loss and subsequent self-cultivation that we might find another logic of formation. Perhaps it is in the construction of something like a “Nom-du-Père” which will hollow out a space for cultivating something other than the self that we might look for another model of formation. I will return to this in the following chapter.

The framing of the problematic in terms of masculine and feminine immediately links this discussion to theories of gender and sexual difference. While sexual difference is sometimes viewed in the North American context as an outmoded concept associated with French feminism, gender is viewed as the theoretically correct framework through which questions of masculine and feminine experience are to be approached. Lacan’s work particularly strikes many readers as no longer relevant, and at times even offensive. Perhaps one is right to be offended: it is unlikely that Lacan was exempt from the sexism of his time and place. However, like feminists thinkers such as Juliet Flower MacCannell and Joan Copjec, I find in Lacan’s work on femininity useful conceptual tools for thinking difference. Where gender theory rightly shows us how differences between men and women are produced and not inevitable, it does little to show us how to think difference outside structures of representation, to borrow Smith’s phrase. That is, it limits (sexual) difference to a particular ontological mode where all differences are the same: open to resignification. On the other hand, the concept of sexual difference seems to rely on anatomy as the bedrock of the difference it wants to talk about. In what follows, I would like to address the gender/sexual difference divide and where they prove to be an inadequate framework for taking up the challenge of a feminine *Bildung*, that is, a different logic of formation hinted at in female *Bildungsromans*.

Reading Gender, Reading Sexual Difference

The germ of thinking about a feminine *Bildungsroman* began in my thinking about Judith Butler's theory of gender as she presented it in her seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. To begin with, my question had little to do with femininity or masculinity but rather with age. From my access point to theory, Butler's theory rightly or wrongly functioned as received truth; I had been given very little education in feminist theory and by the time I did my undergraduate degree at the end of the nineties, gender theory was presented as a sufficient critique of sexual identities: we could now throw off the shackles of a sexually divided world and study how power created sexual difference through gender differences (where presumably there were none?). In the late nineties as political correctness policed the boundaries of what it was and was not possible to think, gender theory seemed to provide an acceptable framework through which one could talk about sexual differences exactly because it neutralized them; masculine or feminine, we were all equal victims of regulatory norms. And if one was not somehow gender-bending or troubling gender—in one's critical readings or in one's gender performance (as one was wont to say)—one was sadly a dupe of obviously repressive norms. For me and many of my fellow students, gender theory was, as one of my girlfriends put it, “the possibility of being free,” and being free was the obvious, unquestioned reason for any critique.¹⁰ This introductory narrative is not meant as a critique of

¹⁰ The use of the word “free” now strikes me as incredibly telling and in need of considerable critique. It seems entirely of its place and time, a place and time where freedom was equated with being able to do what one wants (never mind that “what one wants” tended to be what everyone else wanted, that proverbial piece of the pie, which only kept in place the economic and class status quo even if it upset the gender status quo.) That gender theory appeared and took root in the American context at a time of political correctness when the sanctity of the individual (his right to be different, unique) was being reinforced and thus became another support for/another expression of the Anglo-American ideology of choice and respect for individual rights is a historical convergence that remains, in my opinion, insufficiently thought. Is it, for example, a

gender theory as such but as a critique of the reception of gender theory and how it functioned in critical discourse at the moment I was exposed to it. Sexual difference had become gender. As such, gender was the conceptual framework through which bodies were thought. Within this framework, the question of age appeared.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body” and as such not “a natural sort of being” (44). It followed, for me, that age must also be a stylization of the body because gender is not static but must transform itself in order to be inscribed in biological time in order to take on the appearance of a natural sort of being. One is never performing masculinity or femininity; one is always performing a boy of ten, a girl of five, a man of thirty, a woman of fifty. The considerable anxiety that people express when little girls precociously take on adult aspects of femininity (wearing clothes deemed to be “age-inappropriate,” for example) or, conversely, when middle-aged women and men do not gracefully bow out of the mating game attests to the crucial role that age plays in naturalizing gender differences and inscribing them in the framework of heterosexual reproduction. Learning to be gender appropriate is always also learning to be age appropriate. Age, I claimed, was also a form of drag. My thinking at this stage was preoccupied with representations of what I called age drag. I wrote an essay on two characters in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. One was a girl of twelve whose gender was a thirty-year-old woman and a grown man whose gender was a five-year-old girl. Such representations helped us to see, I argued, the constructedness of age.

coincidence that gender theory took on theoretical importance at a time when late capitalism needed consumers to be sufficiently invested in their individuality that they were willing to take on debt to express it? In psychoanalytic terms, we might pose the question thus: how did/does the concept of gender (and not gender theory as such) function in capitalist societies to deny castration and structure a fantasy of regaining a lost *jouissance* (imagined as the freedom of the individual)? Does it work, and if so how, to maintain *jouissance* at the expense of subjective desire (desire being the inscription in the symbolic of the subject’s singular experience of irretrievable loss, i.e., lack, of *jouissance*)?

Age, too, was a regulatory norm to be liberated from. The question then became for me how this norm worked. Where could we see it functioning? How does one learn to act one's age? How does one go from doing "girl" to doing "woman," for example?

I became interested in coming-of-age narratives. If my research centered on narratives of female coming of age, it was at first due to an unquestioned participation in what I perceived as an academic norm: one's research is somehow guaranteed or validated by one's speaking position. Women mostly work on gender and feminism, men mostly work on big theoretical questions, minorities mostly work on critical race theory or postcolonial theory, gays on queer theory, etc. How could and why should I, a woman, speak about how one comes to do "man"? And, then, also, as with many theoretical problems, my questioning was sparked by personal observation and experience. I am a woman who is very bad at acting her age, and I am far from the only one. But my original line of questioning and the reasons behind my choice of research object were abruptly troubled by my encounter with psychoanalytic theories of femininity, theories I had unquestioningly dismissed as normative. After all, Butler herself had shown that the "structure of religious tragedy in Lacanian theory effectively undermines any strategy of cultural politics to configure an alternative imaginary for the play of desires." Therefore, "Lacanian theory must be understood as a kind of 'slave morality'" (72). Similarly, she had shown that Freud's theory of gender acquisition was founded on "a history of enforced sexual prohibitions which is untold and which the prohibitions seek to render untellable [... foreclosing] the possibility of a more radical genealogy into cultural origins of sexuality and power relations" (82). Viewed in the light of this critique, psychoanalytic thought appeared as a dead-end that tethered gender to heterosexist norms. Before ever having read Lacan or Freud on femininity, they were already effaced as possible interlocutors. Until I read Joan Copjec's essay "Sex and the

Euthanasia of Reason.”

In this essay, Copjec provides a reading of Lacan’s formulae of sexualization, as they appear in his twentieth seminar, *Encore*. Her reading argues that the import of Lacan’s formulae is that they move the question of sexual difference from the realm of gender where it appears as an effect of norms to the realm of logic where it appears as an effect of reason’s failure in relation to being. Sexual difference is the effect of the impossibility of logic to formalize, to write a universal without remainder; there are two ways in which it tries and two ways in which it fails. The following chapter will go more fully into this concept; the present discussion seeks to communicate the conceptual revolution that Copjec’s essay and by extension psychoanalytic sexualization produced in my approach to the key concepts of my enquiry: “girl” and “woman.” They became concepts tied up with the limits of reason and language. No longer were they about performing norms or even about my specific speaking position; they were about the possibility of some other mode of being not guaranteed by reason. In other words, the problem of “woman” does not necessarily have anything to do with women; it is a problem less of knowledge and fact and one of truth. And in this respect, the problem woman poses for me departs from gender theory and feminism’s liberatory agenda (though I am in complete agreement with the necessity for it); the problem is less about seeing how women are repressed and more about theorizing the conceptual tools for discerning what Charles Shephardson calls “another mode of being, beyond mere ‘existence’ and ‘nonexistence’” (“Derrida and Lacan,” 74).

Both Lacan’s and Butler’s theories are heirs to Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking work *Le Deuxième sexe*. Even if Butler attempts to go beyond de Beauvoir by arguing that the very category of woman needs to be critiqued, she develops that critique within the conceptual field opened up by de Beauvoir, that of “devenir femme.” Whereas de Beauvoir had made use of

becoming to denaturalize (the concept of) Woman (sundering woman from female), Butler makes use of becoming to desubstantivize (the noun) woman. In *Gender Trouble*, she writes:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. [...] It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (43)

“Becoming” recasts “woman” as action, transforming her ontological status, which means that “woman” is open to radical resignifications for there is nothing that tethers her to being. She is only considered in her quality as an epistemological phenomenon. If we can say that woman exists, she exists only in the field of the signifier, and like the signifier, she refers only to other signifiers, remaining barred from any signified. Copjec explains:

the thesis of [*Gender Trouble*] is not that the meaning of the term *woman* has shifted and will continue to shift throughout history but that it is “never possible finally to become a woman” (33), that one’s sexual identity is itself never complete, is always in flux. In other words, Butler concludes from the changing *concepts* of women something about the *being*, the *existence* of women. (“Euthanasia” 204)

When Lacan declares that “La Femme n’existe pas,” I think we have to hear an echo of de Beauvoir. Her demystifying, denaturalizing work was one of the conceptual cuts that broke the hegemony in the West of sexually differentiated roles as the natural destiny of human beings. Like de Beauvoir, Lacan views the ideal woman who would respond perfectly to man’s desire as a cultural fabrication, a fantasy that operates so that men might imagine the possibility of

complete fulfillment and that women might imagine themselves the object who could ensure it. In her history of psychoanalysis, Elizabeth Roudinesco develops the long debate within psychoanalysis about the nature of feminine sexuality which revolved around Freud's claim that there was only one libido and it was masculine, and while she situates Lacan's graphs of sexuation within this debate, she also notes that his work has to be understood in the context of the radical feminist movements that came out of 1968. "At that time," writes Roudinesco, "Simone de Beauvoir became the principal reference of French feminism, both in her person and her symbolic position" (517). De Beauvoir provided the framework for denaturalizing patriarchal discourse about women but she also provided them with the foundation for claiming a specific feminine sexuality that had to be liberated from phallogocentrism. Lacan's development of the graphs of sexuation which began in 1971 in his eighteenth seminar¹¹ (culminating in the twentieth) attempts to reconcile Freud's insistence on one libido and feminists' insistence on a specifically feminine sexuality.

Lacan pushes de Beauvoir's argument in the opposite direction to Butler. If Butler finds in the fall of Woman a proliferation of signification, Lacan finds a lack of signification there. For Butler women take on existence in the signifying field; for Lacan they cannot find enough. Lacan's position, however, opens onto a paradox: if women lack existence (in the signifier), then they have, he argues, some being. Lacan calls this being that does not exist "la jouissance feminine." Much has been written about this concept, some have even tried to make it speak, but

¹¹ Interestingly, in the eighteenth seminar, Lacan shows himself to be aware of the American invention of gender as opposed to sex. He discusses Robert Stoller's book *Sex and Gender* (1968). Though he criticizes Stoller for failing to read transsexuals as psychotics ("faute de tout repère, la forclusion lacanienne ne lui étant jamais parvenue aux oreilles"), he makes the surprising following statement: "L'identité de genre n'est rien d'autre que ce que je viens d'exprimer par ces termes, l'homme et la femme" (31). For a genealogy of the concept of gender, see Toril Moi's *What Is a Woman?*.

I think that what Lacan gives us in this concept is the possibility to think the limits of our ability to conceptualize, and he transmits to us his desire to interrogate where they are found and how they might be marked out. Feminine *jouissance* has no content, no qualities—it is not even a pleasure in the usual sense of the word. It may often appear as anxiety. It appears when the limits of the signifier are approached; perhaps more accurately it *is* these limits. Lacan did not banish women to silence, to the outside of language; he found rather that they never stopped talking of a silence that inhabits language, which is to say that the defect lies in language, not in women.

The defect that women exposed is the radically egalitarian nature of language in the matter of sexual *jouissance*, its inherent blindness to difference: it measures all speaking beings against one yardstick and is indifferent to our protestations of unfairness, to our pleas of special treatment. In one sense, this aligns Lacan with some queer theorists, like Butler, who call for the *recognition* of other modes of sexuality, sexual enjoyments, and sexual bodies that fall far afield of the norm. To the extent that they want enjoyments, practices, and bodies recognized as sexual, theirs is a call for being included in those who are measured, and there is, to my mind, no reason to think that the sexual signifier measures them differently or fails to recognize them. Queer sexualities and bodies are full-fledged members of the sexual field. We can submit anyone and anything to the sexual signifier, indeed, all speaking beings are submitted to the sexual signifier; it is inescapable. However, the sexual signifier is not the same thing as socially recognized sexual practices, pleasures, and bodies. Submission to the sexual signifier is what ensures that we may experience sexual enjoyment as such or sexualize our bodies, be it socially recognized by others or not. But this production of others in the sexual field ultimately strikes me as deaf to the import of femininity's insight. Whereas queerness seems to (sometimes gleefully) demand "why isn't there more?," femininity seems to wearily repeat "is that all there is?"

For example, in his book *Beyond Sexuality*, Tim Dean calls for a “less genitally oriented” queer sexual practice (172). In a thought-provoking reading of the functioning of the death drive in current gay practices that have created an ecology of disease transmission, Dean remarks that the production of this ecology was facilitated by “gay men’s sexual imagination remain[ing] too limited” (171). Through its placing corporeal and ejaculatory sexual practices as the basis of its identity, the gay community has closed off other practices that might bring enjoyment; in such a community, an AIDS epidemic, for example, would not be difficult to understand. Arguing that Lacan shows that “*jouissance* remains irreducible to sex,” Dean suggests “that [the community] approach *jouissance* via routes other than the genital or corporeal” (171). He explains:

I am particularly interested in various commitments to aestheticism that marked men as deviants from norms of heterosexual masculinity—commitments that nevertheless cannot be understood in terms simply of sublimation or the distortions of the closet. In this respect, I wish to exploit Bersani’s thesis that certain aesthetic practices reproduce a form of intensity or *jouissance*—a syncope—that is not secondary or sublimated, but is in fact identical to the self-shattering intensity of primary masochism. [...] What a certain psychoanalytic tradition makes available through the concept of *jouissance* is what Bersani calls the “peculiar idea of a sexuality independent of sex,” or “sexual activity no longer attached to particular acts.” [...] Hence, far from being antisex or “sex-negative,” this project takes a more expansive view of sex, insisting along with Freud that what we mean by *sexual* might not conform to commonsensical, implicitly heteronormative ideas concerning sex. By finding more sex rather than less, a psychoanalytic perspective suggests how sexual satisfaction may be attained without genital stimulation. (172-3)

Dean’s project is daring from a certain point of view, but he ultimately leaves in place the sexual

signifier while bringing other practices under its purview. I would argue that “a form of intensity” achieved through aesthetic practices is not an other *jouissance*; it is simply aesthetics sexualized or sex by other means. Dean’s reasoning demonstrates the distance between feminine and non-genital *jouissance*, and his equation of aesthetics with sex suggests, I think, a reason for using, at least at times, Lacan’s and Freud’s term for the sexual signifier: the phallus. There is a history to the practices we invent to experience *jouissance*, but changes in practices do not necessarily equal changes in structure, as we have just seen. The continued use of the term *phallus* as the sexual signifier strikes me as far less problematic than the possibility that it maintains its dominance covertly by virtue of its functioning going unnamed. Real alternatives to the signifier of desire—new desires and other desires—are just that: new and other and thus difficult if not impossible to recognize. *Phallic* would perhaps be the last word one would associate with them (we will see this further in the discussion of Alain Badiou’s theory of truth in the following chapter). The challenge of femininity is not how to imagine other, non-genital pleasures—phallic pleasures are fine as far as pleasures go—but how to think in another structure of enjoyment. Femininity is something, if not more radically different, then different than queerness.

We now begin to get a sense of the inadequacy of the framework of gender for approaching the problem that femininity poses to thought, but the previous discussion also indicates that more traditional concepts of sexual difference do not serve very well either. Feminist thought that approaches femininity through sexual difference as an effect of biological facticity equate it with the condition of being a woman. The biological condition of being a woman is real and has determining consequences in the life of an individual; I do not mean to suggest the contrary. And it is true that the relation between sexualization in Lacan’s thinking and

the sexed bodies that undergo sexuation is unclear. On the one hand, he emphatically cuts masculinity and femininity from the realm of the biological; on the other hand, his language often equates the signifier “man” with the signifier “male” and “woman” with “female.” In an article entitled “The Origins and Ends of Sex,” Stella Sandford takes Copjec and the Lacanian theory of sexuation to task for not sufficiently holding open the distinction between the unconscious and the biological. She argues:

what Copjec needs to make her case is an argument for the alleged invariable constancy of the structure of sexual difference, an account of the necessity of its ‘compulsion’ *in this form*, rather than a mere presumption of it.

In the absence of any such argument Copjec’s ‘real’ sex is a mythic structure, a paralogistic inference drawn from a transcendental ground (for formal conditions of subjectivation). Without an argument for, rather than a normative social injunction in favour of, the necessity of the sexual positions in Lacan’s account of sexuation, ‘sexual difference’ in Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot answer for itself without secret recourse to the mythic function of a biological concept of sex difference, borrowing its sheen of necessity. (182)

Sandford rightly points out a failing in psychoanalytic discourse to distinguish between a scientific discourse of sexual difference and subjective structures. Perhaps many psychoanalysts and theorists too easily rely on scientific concepts to shore up their understanding of a theory that is far from commonsensical. Scientific discourse itself struggles with the instability of the concepts of male and female when faced with bodies that fail to align with them. The two-ness of biological sex has had to recede to the level of chromosomes to find any scientific support.¹² In

¹² Even here the phenomenon of chimera makes this evidence shaky.

this respect, the psychoanalyst Genevieve Morel's comment is telling. In her essay "Psychoanalytical Anatomy," she writes: "The nebulous area between sexes, which cannot be fully discounted, is continually being reduced by the spectacular progress now being made in the realm of chromosomal differentiation" (29). The reassertion here of the two-ness of sex through recourse to scientific discourse despite an admitted real world experience of bodies that are neither exactly male nor female strikes a dogmatic note. The role of the discourse of biology in the psychoanalytic understanding of sex is, as Sandford points out, insufficiently thought. At the same time, it is a problem that some analysts have attempted to tackle. In his essay "Roc de *queer*," Alain Lemosof asks:

Comment expliquer que ce qui semblait, dans ce tableau [de sexuation], subvertir l'ordre du sexe et du genre, soit illustré par les figures sexuées et genrées les plus traditionnelles avec ses connotations les plus problématiques, par exemple que "les" femmes ne peuvent rien dire de "leur" jouissance supplémentaire? Pourquoi, quand il est question du "féminin" dans une filiation lacanienne, bien que ce féminin soit posé analytiquement comme n'étant pas "l'apanage" des femmes, il paraît incontestable que la sexualité féminine, des femmes, s'y trouve plus et éminemment intéressée? (120)

That a psychoanalyst poses this question reveals to what extent the role of biological concepts is unclear in Lacan's theory, and its role remains problematic. Lemosof himself turns to Colette Soler's work *Ce que Lacan disait des femmes* to attempt an answer. There Soler questions why the feminine body is most often called to the place of the lack in the symbolic. Her understanding is that the mother is always the subject's first experience of the Other of speech. The mother's body, which remains inaccessible to the child, becomes confused with the lack in the symbolic, making of the feminine body a hole in the symbolic (Lemosof 121-22). Lemosof himself is far

from convinced that either Freud or Lacan succeeded at separating gender and sexual difference. Quoting Butler, he concedes that the relation between gender and sexual difference remains a question for our time.

If I retain Lacan's terminology, it is not without reservations, but it is also not without reason. It is entirely possible that femininity, as Lacan conceives, is a fiction and that he imposed on women's speech a twentieth-century heterosexist view unknowingly propped up by scientific discourse. On the other hand, women have historically had unequal access to modes of representation; from a psychoanalytic point of view that did not prevent them from being subjects, but it did make them a different kind of subject: one who did not have access to the same means to confront the death drive that language introduces into the body of the speaking being. Women had learned to survive without them; especially they had learned to live without sexual *jouissance* as a means to organize the drives. When women began to call for and imagine their own form of sexual enjoyment, Lacan's claim that they were not-all under the phallic function and that they had access to a supplemental *jouissance* beyond the sexual served as a reminder that women were the source of a *savoir* of something else that sex could not answer for. Through his theories on femininity, Lacan held open the question of a subject that operates within another structure than the phallic one. Women's call for their own imaginary, their own fantasies risked closing off the possibility of that other subject, capturing her within the logic of the phallus. Thus, it was in historically situated women that Lacan found an as yet unthought subject.

I do not imagine that my account has offered an explanation that will satisfy everyone. I admit that the relation of women to femininity is fraught and remains a question, but because it is a question does not therefore make it untrue that there is such a thing as femininity. I admit to

there being a logical problem (but that is after all the point: logic does not allow us to say that Woman exists; all critics of sexual difference prove Lacan's claim), but I'm unsure that there is a theoretical or ethical problem with Lacan's claim that there is such a thing as femininity as a different subjective logic. Because our reason fails over the two-ness of sex (and not over, for example, an infinity of sexes), because sexual difference does not *exist* only sexual differences do, does that mean that we should abandon the possibility of the Other sex, the one that we imagined women to be? Do we hold open that possibility? The import of this possibility is, for me, not to make Woman exists (which is impossible) or to impose heterosexuality, but to think how subjects might live outside a relation to the object and thus outside the pleasure principle and the systems of knowledge that sustain it. That possibility is what women often spoke about; they seem less able to do so today—perhaps fewer of them are assuming femininity, and nothing obliges them to. Its ethical demands are not easy to live with and one is likely to be considered slightly mad. Living outside the pleasure principle means, in one sense, living without the support of ready-made fantasies and to mistrust the discourses that impose meaning on the world¹³; it is to face alone the death drive. Such a position calls upon the subject to be inventive, to make use of the symbolic in ways it has not yet been made use of so that other desires may exist. The crisis of late capitalism and the frenetic consumption of our natural resources seem to call for such a subject. The feminine subject may remind us that the pleasure principle so expertly deployed by the logic of capital and the ideology of the market is not all there is. There are other responses to being a subject who lacks. While the masculine structure allows the subject to respond to the limits of the pleasure principle by sublimating, the feminine structure

¹³ This is not the same thing as thinking a certain discourse is wrong and therefore needs to be corrected; it is to mistrust the possibility of knowledge to make sense of one's lived experience. The Other sex particularly mistrusts the discourse of sexuality to give meaning to, to answer for the body's experience of the drive.

calls on the subject to respond by creating.¹⁴ Through her dissatisfaction, her quest for something else that is not reducible to meaning, the feminine subject will serve again and again as a reminder that what we know is not all there is.

But even if the feminine subject is not to be found in gender or in a biological condition, she precedes neither of these. If unlike Butler, Lacan gives being to women (in the form of feminine *jouissance*), he does think, like Freud, that one must become a woman. In other words, woman's being is not given, it does not precede her existence. How then does this being come to be? My thesis is that certain novels about the girl present us with a formation of this being and thereby allows us to speak of a feminine *Bildungsroman*. subjectivity.

The Bluest Eye

So what might this other type of reading look like? Where might we see a becoming within sexual difference and not in gender? To introduce the problematic that the readings in the following chapters will more fully address, we will look at Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Often referred to as a *Bildungsroman* or a coming-of-age narrative, *The Bluest Eye* recounts the story of Pecola Breedlove, a pubescent black girl in mid-century America, who eventually goes mad for want of love. As a poor black girl, she is considered an abject object, and her desire for blue eyes signals her eventual descent into madness, what Morrison calls her "psychological murder" (Morrison x).

An accessible novel, *The Bluest Eye* has been taught in high school and university literature courses to illustrate the cruelty and injustice of racism, particularly for young black women. Morrison herself wrote the novel in response to the "black is beautiful" movement, which seemed not to take sufficiently into account the "internalization" of "inferiority originating

¹⁴ Juliet Flower MacCannell writes movingly of this in her essay "Jouissance Between the Clinic and the Academy: The Analyst and Woman."

in an outside gaze” (xi). As the movement reclaimed black bodies and faces as images of beauty, Morrison thought about this possibility in relation to a personal experience. She explains:

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead. (x)

Morrison’s childhood friend poignantly indicates that the problem she faced was not one simply of a devalorizing larger culture but her own incapacity to see beauty in any other features than those of white faces. However, I think that Morrison’s childhood friend reveals another problem, one to do with being a woman: how not being the right object (or an object at all, if the term implies a relation to desire) brings its own form of anxiety and misery. This is the interest that Morrison’s book holds for me in the present discussion. Her text brings into view one of the dynamics of femininity that is too quickly brushed under the rug: the desire to participate in the objectifying discourse of beauty.

This is not simply to appropriate Morrison’s text in a sort of critical *détournement*. Morrison’s novel is about racism, but not only, for even as Morrison situates the problem within the dynamics of American racism, she does not think of it simply as an effect of racial inequality. Morrison describes the effect that the her friend’s statement had on her thus:

Until that moment I had seen the pretty, the lovely, the nice, the ugly, and although I had certainly used the word “beautiful,” I had never experienced its shock—the force of which was equaled by the knowledge that no one recognized it, not even, or especially, the one who possessed it.

It must have been more than the face I was examining: the silence of the street in the early afternoon, the light, the atmosphere of confession. In any case it was the first time I knew beautiful. Had imagined it for myself. Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*. (x)

The shock of her friend's face emerging as beautiful in Morrison's realization that blue eyes would ruin its perfection awakens Morrison to the necessity of an other to make beauty exist. Things aren't just beautiful but are made so. One does not look at beauty; one sees it—seeing becoming a verb of action and not of perception. So that is one part of the problem: the disjunct between the object and the gaze that constitutes it as beautiful, which reveals an asymmetry between the two positions. The gaze has a primacy over the object. The other part of the problem Morrison reveals in a seemingly inconsequential remark about the central character of her novel. "But," she writes, "as singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls" (xii). That is, Morrison is trying to tell us something not simply about racism but about the particularity of girls themselves in relation to the gaze of others. Through the figure of the black girl in racist America of the mid-twentieth century, Morrison brings into view something about what it means to be in a feminine position—something that might not otherwise be seen.

Morrison claims that *The Bluest Eye* "pecks away at the gaze that condemned" her young friend to "racial self-loathing." As she explains her motivation: "And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" (xi). Morrison's language makes explicit something that remains implicit in her claim. She moves from the indefinite pronoun "one" to the definite "her."

Pecola's story examines not simply how the racial gaze takes hold of a black psyche but how it takes hold of a girl's psyche. My claim is that *The Bluest Eye* in imaging how Pecola learns to become self-loathing also imagines how she becomes a woman; femininity has to occur for the gaze to take effect.

When we first meet Pecola, she is eleven years old and has been taken in by a family because her own had been turned out of their rented house and her father put in jail. As a result, the family is momentarily disbanded, and Pecola is without a home. So she is taken in by Claudia's, one of the narrators, family; Claudia is nine and it is from her point of view that Pecola's story really begins. The decision to begin Pecola's story from the vantage point of a nine-year-old girl is not accidental. Claudia, we are informed, "had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of [her] psyche which would allow" her to understand something about the eleven-year-old Pecola. She can't understand why Pecola should adore Shirley Temple and find her to be "so cu-ute." Claudia herself hates the young actress; as she explains: "because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). In the distance between being nine and eleven years old, the girl moves from hate to love, from envying what the ideal girl does to what she is.

Claudia gives a perspective in relation to the gaze that precedes what the novel figures as femininity proper. The situation of the girl begins with the gift of a doll, but Claudia's reaction to it reveals her to be unconvinced by the offer:

It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its

mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother. Motherhood was old age, and other remote possibilities. (20)

In this description of the girl's first encounter with the ideal of blue-eyed beauty, the racialized ideal is addressed to her in terms of maternity. As she feels uninterpellated by maternity, the ideal has no hold on her. On the other hand, the desire communicated in this "gift" becomes a question for her:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." [...] I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (20-1)

Claudia's interrogation of what is "said to be lovable" indicates that she operates within a certain structure, one where she is in the position of the one who "gazes." And while her questioning suggests a certain feminine mistrust, she appears little wounded by the failure of the object to please. Her struggle revolves around not being able to find the right lens, as it were, through which to see the same object as everyone around her.

Thus, Claudia's (and by extension Pecola's) shift from hate to love involves not so much a change in position but a change in perspective, a more complete alienation within the socially defined parameters of what may be desirable. The problem will become how does one go from learning to desire to learning to be desired, because it is not loving blue-eyed girls that will undo

Pecola but wanting to be loved as they are loved. The novel figures this change as a key moment in Pecola's story: a question that arises in relation to her menarche.

Pecola's first period is the central event of the novel's first episode, in which we are introduced to her. It occurs as she is playing with Claudia and Claudia's older sister, Frieda. Pecola has no understanding of the sudden appearance of blood; it is Frieda who will name it: "I know what that is! [...] That's ministratin'" (27). When Pecola asks if she will die from it, Frieda casually proclaims: "Noooo. You won't die. It just means you can have a baby!" (28). That night once in bed, Pecola breaks the silence by asking, "Is it true that I can have a baby now?" The exchange that follows is I would argue what makes a woman of Pecola:

"Sure," said Frieda drowsily. "Sure you can."

"But...how?" Her voice was hollow with wonder.

"Oh," said Frieda, "somebody has to love you."

"Oh."

There was a long pause in which Pecola and I thought this over. It would involve, I supposed, "my man," who, before leaving me, would love me. But there weren't any babies in the songs my mother sang. Maybe that's why the women were sad: the men left before they could make a baby.

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" But Frieda was asleep. And I didn't know. (32)

The scene is pivotal because it indicates the moment where Pecola understands her destiny to be dependent on an unknowable other, "somebody" who would love her. In other words, the lethal blow that will lead to her eventual madness is delivered in what the text stages

as the moment she becomes a woman. It comes not from the loathing gaze of racism, but from the thoughtless prattle of little girls repeating a half-understood discourse on sexuality. If Claudia fails to experience a crisis of knowing following Frieda's announcement, it is because, unable "to have a baby," she is not called to a new position. Claudia interprets Frieda's statement from an identificatory position with her own mother, suggesting a certain trust of the order she represents. Why, then, does the novel figure "becoming a woman" as a crisis in knowing?

In his article "Four Seasons in Femininity or *Four Men in a Woman's Life*," psychoanalyst Willy Apollon speaks about the adolescence of the girl as a period in which she learns the "that there is a vertiginous distance between the signifier, where love is constituted as a discourse, and the real of the excess where the Other's desire projects the subject" (105). The first man in a woman's life is her father (or one who represents the father) who through his words of love makes up for, as it were, the inadequacies of the symbolic order which equates femininity to maternity and leaves unaddressed "the subjective exigency of an aesthetics of enjoyment" (104). The father's "gift of the signifier" removes the girl's body from the field of the (masculine) sexual and sustains her in a relation to the field of the signifier where she is constituted as subject distinct from the mother. In his clinical practice, Apollon has noted that women speak of a certain point in their childhood when they are overwhelmed by an excess that the signifier cannot hold at bay. The stories they recount to *account* for their experience often revolve around scenes of seduction in which a man's attentions position her as the object of his fantasy. This sets in motion a "quest for love" within the field of the sexual in order to find what Apollon calls an "other *jouissance*" (108). Libido, or what Lacan would call phallic *jouissance*, is the only drive that the symbolic recognizes. To search then for an "other *jouissance*" than the phallic one within the field of the sexual is to mistake the purpose of the tool, as it were. But if

the girl insists in her confusion, it is because, explains Apollon, she finds a ready-made explanation for the *jouissance* that troubles her. In the imaginary realm of sexual relation, the girl can fantasize that the desire of an other has caused a disruption in her being. In this way, she avoids a feminine savoir about the insufficiency of the symbolic to channel the death drive; she makes an other responsible for the effects of the signifier. The sexual scenario is, of course, only one imaginary support that the girl may find in her quest to respond to the death drive. Apollon writes:

If for some (is it the majority?) this target of the second man is a sexual target, for others it is not. It is while reading *The Plague* by Camus that Marjorie, at age 13, leaves behind her childhood and falls headlong into this passion for “something else”, which will prove to be the axis of her life as a woman. [...] Sex traverses and supplements her passion for gaining something more out of life than that to which culture and science restrict us. Her entire life is like a burning reminder: sex can neither limit nor extinguish *jouissance*.

(107)

In the readings that follow, we will see how other imaginary supports serve to answer for an overwhelming experience of the death drive. What interests me here is that Apollon gives us a hint in thinking a feminine coming of age. If, as Smith argues, the traditional *Bildungsroman* follows a masculine model of coming to terms with the regulated and somehow always underwhelming enjoyment available under the Nom-du-Père, then perhaps a feminine model would involve a character's coming to terms with an overwhelming experience of the death drive due to the inadequacy of the signifier.

Certainly, the text suggests that Pecola's eventual rape by her father is one figuration of the girl's being overwhelmed by death drive or the *jouissance* of the Other, but to read her rape

as the event that drives her to madness is to dismiss the point of the first three quarters of the book in which Pecola increasingly experiences herself as an abject object in the eyes of others. Particularly, it is to fail to take into account the determining role that the novel's first episode, involving her menarche, plays. In this first episode, the novel figures the girl's discovery of the signifier's inadequacy as an enigmatic statement about the sexual relation that places it in the realm of the signifier; being inscribed in the sexual relation, being a woman is a matter of being loved (and not just a matter of being physically capable of having a baby). If she questions this statement, if it is an enigma for her, it is because she has bumped up against a limit that shows language to be lacking. The text figures this by having Claudia speak in Pecola's stead. Where Claudia recuperates Frieda's statement into the everyday discourse of (failed) romantic love she has heard in her mother's songs, Pecola's question jolts her out of this familiar configuration. If the text cannot speak Pecola's experience, it can indicate this impossibility through the juxtaposition of Claudia's childish reasoning and Pecola's searingly unanswerable question. Indeed, how do you get somebody to love you? Because the novel figures Pecola's abject status as ugly, little black girl as barring her from participating in the fantasy of being a lovable object (that position, she has learned, being reserved for blue-eyed girls), it allows the common discourse of the heterosexual relation to be revealed as a fantasy. The racist social order in which Pecola must now assume her sex leaves her without the imaginary coordinates necessary to inscribe even momentarily her experience of the death drive within a ready-made fantasy. This being the case, Pecola is on her own. At the precise instance that the novel stages her discovery of the inadequacy of the signifier, Pecola does not yet know this. I want to suggest that her *Bildung*, if the novel had allowed her one, would involve discovering it, would necessitate an ethical assumption of a signifying order that cannot guarantee that she will be loved. Thus, even

as Morrison's novel warns about the impossibility of survival when there is a refusal of any love, when one is actively hated as an abject object, she also writes of the woundability of all girls. What makes them woundable is the inadequacy of the signifier that leaves them solitary with no guarantees.

Apollon's clinical observation is that women invariably speak of a determining moment in their childhood which makes them a woman. He observes that this moment often, but not always, involves a man who attempts to seduce them, which precipitates a crisis. This crisis is often marked by strange bodily sensations that the girl experiences as dangerous and for which she has no words. He hypothesizes that when this crisis is presented in terms of seduction, the man serves a particular function: to allow the subject to (unconsciously) fantasize that an other is responsible for the crisis. The seduction scenario also allows the crisis to be inscribed in the sexual field, mitigating its strangeness. But Apollon advises us to examine the structure of these narratives in order to understand why such seemingly inconsequential events become so consequential. In short, their narratives render in imaginary terms the subject's encounter with an unspeakable excess that can find no room in language and so pierces the body, unsettling its homeostasis. That is, one should not take the content literally—it may or may not be true—what is important is the event to which they attempt to give meaning: a life-altering encounter with the limits of language or the death drive.

My claim is that this same phenomenon occurs in feminine *Bildungsromans*. If as Smith, amongst others, has observed the female *Bildungsroman* tends to follow the trajectory of an awakening that often leads to death, I want to suggest that this narrative arc is perhaps a literary expression of what Apollon has hypothesized about the effects of the girl's (imaginary) discovery. Similarly, it is not important whether girls actually experience life-changing

moments; what is of interest is that our cultures imagine them for the girl. The *Bildungsroman* can be read as a cultural site where we attempt to give imaginary form to these moments. Thus, we find within psychoanalysis the conceptual tools for theorizing a feminine *Bildung*, one that reads the girl's struggles and triumphs not in terms of patriarchal repression or phallic fulfillment or in terms of gender norms, but one that pays attention to how the text imagines or provides a structure for the advent of the death drive and the girl's response to it.¹⁵ How does she make use of the symbolic to combat its disruptive, mortifying effects? Where does she succeed? Where does she fail? How does she form the necessary space to persist in the face of an ever-recurring threat to her subjective integrity?

Paradoxically, this theory of feminine *Bildung* in which the girl becomes a woman presents certain challenges to the logic of becoming. Whereas becoming conceives the subject in relation to appearance, representation, signification, it cannot grasp the subject in relation to the advent of the death drive, which falls outside these. The major claim of my thesis is that becoming is not an adequate logic for thinking the feminine subject; instead, this subject has to be thought within what I am calling the logic of event. This logic is based on Alain Badiou's theory of the event. The following chapter will map out the theoretical terrain of Lacan's theory of sexuation as well as Badiou's theory of the event. Together they will form the basis for a theory of the feminine *Bildungsroman*.

¹⁵ In this my reading strategy is not same as that of *écriture féminine*. I am not interested in the formal qualities of the text, but in narrative moments where the text makes appear a structure within which the girl encounters a signifying limit. For a discussion of *écriture féminine* see *La nouvelle née* (Hélène Cixous et Catherine Clément).

INTRODUCTION

FEMININITY: BECOMING AND EVENT

How does one become a woman? From a common sense view, the question appears at first non-sensical. A common sense view would assume a sociological answer. It takes for granted the premise that “woman” designates an adult female and thus one becomes a woman by going through the stages that a society defines as necessary for maturity. In the post-patriarchal West, one completes an education (or not), gets a job, founds a family, or simply gets old enough that calling oneself “a girl” sounds incongruous. But also in this definition is the expectation that a certain psychological maturity is attained, however the social wants to define it, but whose upshot amounts to the psychological wherewithal to successfully meet the demands of the social. The logic of the common sense view holds that if there is a process to maturity and if there are female bodies, then one can become woman. In this type of society, there is nothing to becoming a woman anymore; “how to become a woman” in any specific sense that would be distinct from “how to become a man” is an abandoned cultural project.

Feminists and gender theorists, of course, hear the question differently. They ask how and what “woman” signifies and how “one” (equated with the individual body) comes to be the bearer of that signification. Within theoretical discourse, these are the questions that dominate our thinking about “woman.” These questions, however, are immanent to an ontological framework, one in which the visible body and shared meaning are the only possibilities of being.¹⁶ This being the case, feminists and gender theorists ground “woman,” that is they find a guarantee for her existence, either in the body or in “culture.” Woman can be said to exist

¹⁶ Here I see a manifestation of Alain Badiou’s claim that the era’s dominant ideology is “there are bodies and there is language.” See his essay entitled “Bodies, Languages, Truth.” Published online at lacan.com.

because either “woman” signifies a body (it requires an anatomical referent; “woman” is found in nature) or “woman” signifies an effect of the reiteration of “regulatory fictions” (it requires discursive practices; “woman” is found in culture). The first mode of existence is one that traditional feminists assert while the latter is one that post-structuralist gender theorists argue. Both would, of course, object to this simple dichotomy as a gross reduction of their thought. They argue at great length that the body and meaning are always intertwined, that one cannot get to a pure being of the anatomical body or of a culturally produced meaning. Both see themselves as troubling the very framework (body/meaning) within which they think. I would point out that, nevertheless, they remain within the ontological horizon that this framework makes possible and as such, their thought founders in its attempts to move past the body or culturally shared meanings when thinking about woman. Ultimately, their thought wants to address how “woman” exists but how she can exist without *being*.

Motivated as their projects are by the political/social goal of freeing women from a crushing reification (woman *is* this or that) that always fails to adequately take them into account as individual subjects, they reject the possibility of “woman” *being* anything. Rather, “woman” is a *becoming*. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler, for example asserts:

...*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As on ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is [...] never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (33)

Here Butler gives one of the earliest formulations of her seminal claim that “woman” (and “man”

for that fact) is a becoming that takes on the appearance of being, or of “substance,” in her account. In subsequent work, she will address the body in response to criticism that this initial articulation of her argument does not take sufficiently into account that other pole of our ontological framework. She will, of course, read the body as included in this becoming. I would argue that *becoming* far from allowing us to trouble the body/meaning binary instead functions exactly to allow thought to stay within this framework.

For many traditional feminists and gender theorists, this is a meaningless critique. Their question is exactly about the body and its (social) meanings, that “woman” could be otherwise is beyond the desire motivating their thought. So while I offer this critique of traditional feminism and gender theory, my address aims beyond these fields to the more general field of theoretical discourse as such where the question of woman is left unaddressed, where it is left to the feminists and gender theorists, where the question of woman is simply a woman’s question. Instead, I want to open the possibility for thinking about “woman” beyond her apparent, seeming *existence*. How can one be a woman otherwise? And why might this being otherwise be of interest not only to women?

Of course thinkers outside the fields of feminism and gender studies do think about “woman,” and not simply in her modes of existence. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, for example, produced the concept of “becoming-woman.” The “woman” of “becoming-woman” is neither the female body nor gender. In *Mille Plateaux*, they write:

Ce que nous appelons entité molaire ici, par exemple, c’est la femme en tant qu’elle est prise dans une machine duelle qui l’oppose à l’homme, en tant qu’elle est déterminée par sa forme, et pourvue d’organes et de fonctions, et assigné comme sujet. Or devenir-

femme n'est pas imiter cette entité, ni même se transformer en elle. On ne négligera pas pourtant pas l'importance de l'imitation, ou de moments d'imitation, chez certains homosexuels males; encore moins, la prodigieuse tentative de transformation réelle chez certains travestis. Nous voulons seulement dire que ces aspects inséparables du devenir-femme doivent d'abord se comprendre en fonction d'autre chose: ni imiter ni prendre la forme féminine, mais émettre des particules qui entrent dans le rapport de mouvement et de repos, ou dans la zone de voisinage d'une micro-féminité, c'est-à-dire produire en nous-mêmes une femme moléculaire, créer la femme moléculaire. Nous ne voulons pas dire qu'une telle création soit l'apanage de l'homme, mais, au contraire, que la femme comme entité molaire a à *devenir-femme*, pour que l'homme aussi le devienne ou puisse le devenir. (337-38).

Here the thinkers make a distinction between “molar woman,” which designates the entity (which has form, organs, functions, and is the site of the subject) that we usually think of, and the “molecular woman,” which designates the production of becoming. But what is the becoming of becoming-woman? It must be understood as what opposes molar being, i.e., “des formes, des objets ou sujets molaires [...] qu'on reconnaît à force d'expérience ou de science, ou d'habitude” (337). Becoming-woman refers to the process whereby the body (man or woman) escapes the recognition of habit. Becoming for Deleuze and Guattari is “de sortir des dualismes, être-entre, passer entre, intermezzo” (339). To become a woman in Deleuze and Guattari's framework is to become molecular, to become a body that's not entirely recognizable in the man/woman binary¹⁷.

¹⁷ To be clear, the two thinkers are not referring here to transsexuals or to transgendered persons. Molecular woman is something that they see, for example, in warriors who disguise themselves as women to escape harm. Here there is not an attempt to imitate or perform woman; this is not drag. Rather, molecular woman appears here because Deleuze and Guattari read this appearance

Thus becoming-woman in Deleuze and Guattari is not the becoming of Butler. Whereas in Butler the repetition which makes one recognizable as woman is the becoming that produces woman, in Deleuze and Guattari this repetition is the very loss of becoming. But why do they sex becoming (for the human)? Why is becoming feminine?

In her explanation as to why they site this possibility in the feminine, Rosi Braidotti argues that they speak from a cultural and philosophical legacy that favors the masculine as the standard of stability and being. She writes:

Deleuze argues that the masculine coincides with the fixity of the centre, which in western philosophy is represented through the notion of Being. As such, the masculine is opposed to the process of becoming, understood as the engendering of creative differences. Being allows for no mutation, no creative becoming, no process: it merely tends towards self-preservation and to the stubborn assertion of his own transcendental narcissism.

The consequence is obvious: it pertains to the feminine to become the vehicle of becoming and for the de-essentialized brand of vitalism so dear to Deleuze. [...] Woman remains for Deleuze the sign of fluid boundaries and consequently of potential unhinging of the institution of femininity which has historically functioned as the necessary and necessarily ‘other’ pole of phallogentric culture. (307)

Deleuze and Guattari put *affirmatively* into play what Braidotti calls the “asymmetry” between the sexes. The feminine’s quality of not being adequate to being within discourses of the self and representation (philosophy and psychoanalysis, in this case) becomes the point of departure for

as a specific relation between the body and the world that escapes the logic of the masculine/feminine binary. Here masculine/feminine is left behind, suspended so to speak, because it is forgotten, momentarily indicating that we become something that is unaccounted for in an either/or logic.

undermining molar (stable, recognizable) being.

Braidotti and others of course criticize the two thinkers for not adequately critiquing the very place from which they speak and thus repeating the othering logic that produces the feminine as the site of alterity as such. That is, they do not question why the feminine functions as the very other of being. The feminine is, as it were, simply seen as that which being forgot and thereby it becomes the site of becoming. In this way, the feminine serves in their thought as a means to escape presence or *existence* as molar (discreet and stable) in order to think an *existing* as molecular (diffused, momentary, dynamic).

Therefore, while Deleuze and Guattari are two thinkers who put “woman” to conceptual use in order to think being in the world as otherwise than our usual modes of conceiving it, they also seem to participate in a demand that the feminine subject fail to be. Much like the Butlerian notion of gender as becoming, becoming-woman calls for a subjectivity that undermines its own stability, a subjectivity that locates its *raison d'être* in always becoming. Within these two versions of becoming, this lack of stability is valued as productive of transformation, of new subjective possibilities. But these logics of becoming do so at the expense of the possibility of the feminine subject being in anyway that would be distinct from a masculine being. So, for example, Deleuze and Guattari do grant being to feminine subjects, but only as women, that is, as existing molar subjects, which is the same being as men. What I want to argue is that the possibility of the feminine subject *being* allows us to think being otherwise, one which does not entail collapsing back into modes of existence, either as stabilizing reification or unbounded transformation.

The logic or the ontology of becoming as expressed in the Butlerian notion of gender and the Deleuzian concept of becoming-woman both fail to consider the necessary role that “woman”

plays in allowing them to think this ontology. They seem not to stop to ask why woman appears here. Butler's thought for example departs from Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "on ne naît pas femme: on le devient." From this specific claim about woman, Butler moves into a generalized theory of gender production for both sexes. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari seize upon woman's lack of being in philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses to conceptualize a new generalizable strategy for undermining established modes of thinking and being. How is it then that woman makes "becoming" a possible ontology? Why is she the point of departure for its thinking?

An accepted answer might look something like Braidotti's above quoted explanation for Deleuze's turn to woman, but this is simply begging the question. It begins from the very premise that woman is or has been conceived as (most often a lacking) Other without addressing why. In other words, woman's Otherness is seen as an effect of our thinking, our conceptual frameworks, our discourses but there is no attempt to think why thought, concepts, discourses continually reproduce woman as Other than being.

I would like to consider what Jacques Lacan's concept of the feminine not-all has to contribute to thought's siting of woman as somehow always being's Other. It is my contention that that thinkers of an ontology of becoming do not sufficiently attend to the line of thought that Lacan's concept opens up. They become mired in the vocabulary and are too quick to dismiss any thing that smacks of phallogentrism. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, a volume written in dialogue with Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, Butler, for one, expresses her dislike of psychoanalytic vocabulary:

we can try to accept the watered-down notion of the symbolic as separable from normative kinship, but why is there all that talk about the place of the Father and the

Phallus? [...] The fact that my friends Slavoj and Ernesto claim that the term ‘Phallus’ can be definitionally separated from phallogocentrism constitutes a neologistic accomplishment before which I am in awe. I fear that their statement rhetorically refutes its own propositional content, but I shall say no more. (152-3)

The evident slippage of Butler’s usually dense prose into a colloquialism (“all that talk about”) signals a desire to get to plain speaking; it serves as a rhetorical admonition to Žižek and Laclau to “say what you really mean.” If you don’t mean “father” and “phallus,” why are you saying “father” and “phallus”? These are fair questions, but any fair answer has to take into account the conceptual framework within which these words operate. It is obvious from the last sentences in this quotation that Butler does not grasp the Lacanian distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary, or, if she does, it is apparent that her own thought is grounded on a decision to take what Lacan calls the imaginary as her point of departure for any critique or enquiry. In what follows I would like to address why the phallus is not a phallus but also why the not-all might give us insight into woman’s Otherness. The stakes of my argument, however, ultimately lie in demonstrating why the not-all is not an ontology of becoming.

Freud and Becoming a Woman

Decades before Simone de Beauvoir’s paradigm altering statement that one is not born but rather becomes a woman (made in 1949), Sigmund Freud beat her to the punch. In his 1925 paper “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” Freud was already attempting to formulate a working definition of femininity, one that, though it ties femininity to the female body, is not an essence to be found in that body nor is it quality that the girl encounters in culture that she must then assume. In one of his later articulations of femininity the 1933 paper entitled “Femininity,” Freud defines what psychoanalysis’s interest is in women:

“In conformity with its peculiar nature, psycho-analysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition” (144). Freud is clear here that he is not interested in establishing an ontology of woman. He cannot say what they are; instead, he wants to interrogate how “human individuals who, through the possession of female genitals, are characterized as manifestly or predominantly feminine” come to be feminine sexually. Femininity is not a given. It is something that the bisexual child must take on. But what does the sexual development of the girl mean for Freud? He is trying to figure out how it is that the girl comes to desire a man and a baby. For him, this is the “feminine situation” (159). In other words, the biological function of the female in the reproduction of the species is not a given, the natural functioning of the instincts. Freud resituates in on the plane of desire, a desire itself which is not given but the culmination of a long process. One must come to be in this desiring situation.

This is the most striking difference between Freud and de Beauvoir (and I would argue gender studies) in their two versions of how one becomes a woman. De Beauvoir is ultimately interested in how the little girl is molded by social norms and pressures to take on femininity *qua* social identity, but Freud argues that femininity is the result of a subjective process. In the former, femininity is a social position, a quality of identity that is imposed on the individual; in the latter, femininity is a desiring position. According to Freud, in fact, not all women reach this position. He remarks that some women reject sexuality all together while others take on a “masculinity complex.” So, then, how does one become a woman according to Freud?

Perhaps for the lay person the most striking and confusing claim that he makes regarding girls is that sexually they start out as little men. This is not the bisexuality to which Freud

referred earlier. This concept is one that Freud espoused in his historic *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality* (1905), where he turns to the work of three scientists who have shown that each sex carries traces of both. He writes: “In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex. These either persist without function as rudimentary organs or become modified and take on other functions” (7). The bisexual nature of the organism is a concept that Freud will never abandon, but when, in his “Femininity” essay, he claims that the little girl begins as a little boy, he means something else. Boys and girls, he claim, begin their “early phases of libidinal development in the same manner” (146). Sexuality, then, for Freud is a question of the libido, which he maintained against many of his students, most notably Jung, was non-sexed. He emphatically states: “There is only one libido, which serves both the masculine and the feminine sexual functions. To it itself we cannot assign any sex...” (163). Thus, the little girl and the little boy share in common a phallic phase where, through masturbatory excitation, they anchor the libido to the genitals—the penis for the boy, the clitoris for the girl (146). This is why he claims that “the little girl is a little man”: because she enjoys in the same way that he does, i.e., phallically. Already, we can see that the phallus can not simply be equated with the penis for the clitoris can function as a phallus too. It is noticeable in Freud’s account that the appearance of the phallus is not tied to a reproductive function—it has no biological sexual purpose. It is first and foremost a marker of masturbatory enjoyment (which means, as Lacan will say, that phallic enjoyment is never an enjoyment of the Other). To be clear, Freud himself is quite clear that this phallic enjoyment is available to the girl; put differently, the girl is not not-phallic, she is entirely phallic. This phallic enjoyment, however, is not the only trait the girl has in common with the boy. They also share in common a first love object: the mother. In Freud’s account, the girl must both abandon the clitoris (for the vagina) and the mother for the father;

two steps that the boy does not have. Having established this initial common position between boys and girls, Freud's task is to explain how the girl comes to accomplish the two steps that will make femininity possible.

He finds the determining factor in the girl's experience of the castration complex, an experience precipitated by an event: "the sight of the genitals of the other sex" (155). Freud, of course, argues that this sighting is determining for the boy as well, but his account as to why this event is so determining differs greatly. When the boy catches sight of the female genitals, he "recalls to mind the threats he brought on himself by his doings with [the penis], he begins to give credence to them and falls under the influence of fear of castration" (155). In other words, I would argue, a logical sequence is at play in this determining event. The event seems to produce a trauma but it does not interrupt sense-making; it instead produces meaning, retroactively injecting sense into previously meaningless statements. The boy assumes his sexuality through what might be called the trauma of meaning. For the girl, something far less sensical occurs; Freud describes it thus: "They [girls] at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too" (155). In "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," he describes this moment in this way: "They notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis" (177). Unlike the boy whose encounter with female genitals initiates a chain of reasoning and production of meaning, the girl without the benefit of reasoning "at once" knows and plunges headlong into affect. I think it is with good reason, then, that penis-envy is a Freudian concept at which many people balk. How can knowing precede thought? How can significance appear *ex nihilo*, as it were? One can only assume that Freud reads his own

phallogocentric prejudice into this moment.

In her essay “The Fable of the Stork and Other False Sexual Theories,” Joan Copjec addresses this much criticized passage and clears up this criticism. She explains:

The problem with this account have been amply rehearsed. That the little girl could, through an untutored, naked look, assess in a split second the superior value of the boy’s little organ, and thus of the little boy, strains credibility. But it is Freud himself who points this out as he chastises Alfred Adler for “hopelessly mix[ing]” the “biological, social, and psychological meanings of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’” Freud insists that “it is impossible, and is disproved by observation, that a child, whether male or female, should found the plan of its life on an original depreciation of the female sex and take the wish to be a real man as its ‘guiding line.’ [...] Children have, to begin with, no idea of the *significance* of the distinction between the sexes [...] the *social* underestimation of woman is completely foreign to them.”¹⁸ (66)

Freud himself is quite aware that we cannot confuse the state of the world with the reality of a child’s sexual development. He does not think that the penis is inherently superior in the eyes of children. So why does the girl seem to think so?

In her reading, Copjec zeroes in on the visibility of the penis in Freud’s passage from the original essay on the girl’s development, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes.” There Freud writes that the penis is “strikingly visible.” Copjec comments: “But this is enough, this is the crucial point; what the girl sees in a flash is not the superior social value of the boy, but the fact that *despite the obviousness of his sex, the boy is still visible, visible as sexed being*” (67). Perhaps there is something to this reading, but it still

¹⁸ Copjec is quoting from Freud’s essay “On the History of the Psycho-analytic Movement.”

seems to assume that the girl understands that the penis is sexed. It also retains this event as a real sighting of the actual male anatomy and thus leaves Freud's theory of sexual difference within the realm of brute, empirical givens. But Freud's account of how one becomes a woman is far less obvious than this. For one, Freud's account is clear that the penis can only take on significance for the girl once she has entered the phallic phase. Thus, it is not simply the sight of the penis that operates on the girl but the sight *at a certain moment*. The sight is a site of an intervening moment between the phallic phase and castration. In his later essay "Femininity," Freud does not emphasize the visibility of the organ; he speaks less about the penis and more about the girl's experience... "They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too." Perhaps the difference they are noticing is the organ's visibility, but the organ as such does not appear here—only difference, a difference that, for the girl, has an immediate significance. What strikes me more in this passage is the failure of logic. There is no reason why the girl should see anything and yet she does. What is the significance sited here? I would argue that the significance is not the significance of the penis as such; the significance is that the girl *decides* something like "that is not me, I don't recognize myself there." At this point, her life takes on a new trajectory, one in which the possibility for another site of recognition is pursued.

For Freud, the visual anatomical differences between the sexes must have psychological consequences for the boy and the girl. Yet, in his discussion of femininity, he insists that some girls never recognize the penis as significant. After seeing the male anatomy, the girl, according to Freud, has one of "[t]hree possible lines of development [...]: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis, the second to change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex, the third, finally, to normal femininity" (156). The second line of development, the masculinity complex, is occasioned by the girl's refusal, "as it were, to recognize the unwelcome fact" (161). In other

words, within Freud's own account, there is room for maneuver, for the individual subject must decide how she will respond to the anatomical difference between the sexes; she can decide not to give any significance to this difference thereby suggesting that the penis as such carries no significance in and of itself. Hence when the girl *does* recognize that the difference between the sexes is significant, there is a subjective choice at work here—a subjective choice that has consequences.

Freud calls the consequences of this choice “penis envy.” This is the new state into which the girl falls after “noticing the difference.” The state of penis envy can be attested to by a series of complaints and actions. Freud writes: “They feel seriously wronged, often declare that they want to ‘have something like it too’ (155). The girl gives up on clitoral masturbation and begins to hate her mother. In the “Some Psychological Consequences...” essay, Freud gives an extended commentary on the girl's abandoning of masturbation. Whereas the boy gives up masturbation under the effects of a prohibition, Freud can find no reason for the girl to do so. He writes: “I cannot explain the opposition which is raised in this way by little girls to phallic masturbation except by supposing that there is some concurrent factor which turns her violently against that pleasurable activity” (180). The only supposition that would appear to fit is a sense of humiliation when faced with the boys superior organ: “the girl's reflection that after all this is a point on which she cannot compete with boys and that it would therefore be best for her to give up the idea of doing so” (180). But I read here a decision not to situate her enjoyment at the bodily site where the boy appears to be marked. As she is not compelled by a prohibition, the girl has no logical reason to oppose phallic masturbation, and yet she does. I would qualify the turning away from the phallic organization of the libido as well as from the mother as a subjective process wherein “something like”—and not—the penis is being asked for. What

would something like the penis be? It would perform the same function as the penis: it would be something that would anchor the libido and separate the girl from the mother, as it does for the boy. In other words, it would be something that would allow the girl to be recognized/recognize herself as a distinct enjoying subject. Penis envy can be understood as wish for a prohibition like the one that operates on the penis, a prohibition which designates recognition by the Other and thus recognition of oneself.¹⁹

For Freud, the girl finds her something-like-the-penis in the baby. By converting her wish for a penis into a wish for a baby from her father (and his substitute: husband), the girl finds a “symbolic equivalent” that ends her quest (159). It is only then that she becomes feminine, that is, a woman. Unlike then Judith Butler’s theory of becoming, psychoanalysis posits that one can become a woman. With Judith Butler, however, I take issue with Freud’s designated *telos* for femininity, i.e., maternal desire. Indeed, I want to suggest that “woman,” i.e., the feminine subject (or as Freud calls it “the feminine situation”) does not appear as a *telos* at all but nor is she the effect of becoming. Rather, I read in Freud’s theory of penis-envy the sign that there *is* a feminine subject. A subject who has being as the one who is not under a prohibition that makes her enjoyment recognizable by the Other thereby giving it an existence. Penis-envy indexes a logic wherein we see a subject at work. I also call this subject non-phallic because it is the subject that appears by refusing to site her enjoyment phallically. As Freud rightly shows, this refusal is not simply the operation of the law of sexual difference but the effect of a decision that introduces a rupture in the working of the phallic phase. The Freudian girl decides “in a flash” that phallic enjoyment is not all there is/could be. One becomes a woman at this point: in a flash. At this point, a non-phallic logic takes over. One is a woman by virtue of proceeding in this

¹⁹ I am indebted to Tracy McNulty for this insight during my first reading of Freud’s essay.

logic, not by arriving at a position. One does not become a woman by arriving at a *telos*, desiring a man and a baby, as Freud would have it, but by entering into a trajectory where the phallus does not (entirely) function.

My reading of Freud's theory of sexuality (masculine or feminine) is not a comprehensive one; instead, I wanted to draw out a reading of a logic I see at work in Freud's articulation of what distinguishes femininity from masculinity. What strikes me in his essays are moments of logical disjunction, where the girl's course is determined by reasons that do not seem to follow from the givens of her situation. Far from signaling a bias on Freud's part to impose lack or inadequacy on the girl, these moments allow the girl to come into view as the site of a subjective work where the possibility of being without the phallus is maintained.

Yet Freud does continually refer the girl back to the phallus, ultimately returning it to her in the symbolic equivalent of the baby. He insists that both sexes depend on the phallus in order to find their bearings in the field of sexuality. In a collection of essays published posthumously as *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud writes: "It is to be noted that what comes in question at [the phallic] stage is not the genitals of both sexes but only those of the male (the phallus)" (29). This was the subject of much debate during Freud's own lifetime. In "Female Sexuality," another of his essays dedicated to femininity, Freud responds to these criticisms by insisting on the primacy of the phallus for the girl. Whereas many of Freud's fellow analysts (Ernest Jones, Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, to mention a few) argued in favor of a specifically feminine experience of the body independent of the phallus, Freud never conceded. Femininity occurs through a loss of the phallus.

The Phallic Function and the Not-All

In his "return to Freud," Lacan remained faithful to Freud's insistence on the primacy of

the phallus for women in their assumption of sexual difference, but he considerably reconceives how it should be understood. In his paper entitled “La signification du phallus” (1958), Lacan writes:

Le phallus [...] s'éclaire par sa fonction. Le phallus dans le doctrine freudienne n'est pas un fantasme [...]. Il n'est pas on plus comme tel un objet [...]. Il est encore bien moins l'organe, pénis or clitoris, qu'il symbolise [...]. Car le phallus est un signifiant [...] c'est le signifiant destiné à designer dans leur ensemble les effets de signifié, en tant que le signifiant les conditionne par sa présence de signifiant. (2: 168)

Here Lacan posits that the phallus should be understood in terms of its function which is to signify the presence of the signifier. Reading Freud's psychosexual development accounts through the lens of structural linguistics, Lacan argues that the phallus in Freud's account can only be made sense of by thinking of it in its symbolic function. Describing the defining characteristics of structuralism, Deleuze in his essay “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?” (1967) explains the symbolic. He locates its appearance in structural linguistics which posits that “beyond the word in its reality and its resonant parts, beyond images and concepts associated with words, the structural linguist discovers an element of quite another nature, a structural object,” i.e., the symbolic (171). Structuralism then requires the symbolic:

the first criterion consists of this: the positing of a symbolic order, irreducible to the orders of the real and the imaginary, and deeper than they are. We do not yet know what this symbolic element consists of. We can say at least that the corresponding structure has no relationship with a sensible form, nor with a figure of the imagination, nor with an intelligible essence. It has nothing to do with a *form*: for structure is not at all defined by an anatomy of the whole [...]. Structure is defined, on the contrary, by the nature of

certain atomic elements which claim to account both for the formation of wholes and for the variation of their parts. It has nothing to do with *figures* of the imagination, although structuralism is riddled with reflections on rhetoric, metaphor and metonymy, for these figures themselves imply structural displacements which must account for both the literal and the figurative. Nor has it anything to do with an *essence*: it is more a combinatory formula supporting formal elements which by themselves have neither reality, nor hypothetical functional model, nor intelligibility behind appearances. (173)

I give this long quote to show how the symbolic and “the corresponding structure” demand that we think in (at least, until that time) a non-obvious way. Deleuze is at pains to bring to the fore an understanding of structure through a removing of what it is not. For my purposes, the most helpful articulation that Deleuze makes here is the last quoted above. The structure supports a number of “formal elements” that outside of the structure lose all meaning.

In rethinking Freud’s account of psychosexual development, Lacan identifies the phallus as a formal element that marks the advent of desire, as effect of the signifier, in the speaking being: “Le phallus est le signifiant privilégié de cette marque où la part du logos se conjoint à l’avènement du désir” (170). In other words, the signification of the phallus is not the penis but desire as such. But the principal attribute of the phallus is to signify desire by concealing the very lack that institutes desire because it (the phallus) unites lack to the logos (word or reason). By suturing lack to the realm of the signifier, the phallus functions to support the fantasy that desire can be fulfilled, that we can attain what we lack. In his discussion of how this operates within the “comedy” between the sexes, Lacan suggests that women appear to *be* the phallus, “c’est-à-dire le signifiant du désir de l’Autre” (172) while men appear to *have* the phallus. It is only in the *fantasy* of a relation between the sexes that this logic appears. And to the extent that men and

women maintain this fantasy, they participate in the logic of having or being the signifier of desire. While I think that Lacan here provides some insightful remarks on what we see operative between the sexes even in our day, my interest here is not the relation between the sexes but rather that Lacan posits that there is only one signifier of desire and that there are two ways to relate to it. But at this point in his thinking, Lacan is only looking at the two positions *from* the view point of that signifier. It is only later that he begins to rethink the asymmetry between these two positions. He gives the most succinct formulation of this asymmetry in his *Encore* seminar where the two positions are no longer a matter of having or being the phallus but of being all phallic or not-all phallic.

In the *Encore* seminar, he signals his new approach when he says:

Il y a donc la façon mâle de tourner autour [le rapport sexuel], et puis l'autre, que je ne désigne pas autrement parce que c'est ça que cette année je suis en train d'élaborer— comment, de la façon femelle, ça s'élabore. Ça s'élabore du pas-tout. Seulement, comme jusqu'ici ça n'a pas beaucoup été exploré, le pas-tout, ça me donne évidemment un peu de mal. [...] C'est mon vrai sujet de cette année, derrière cet *Encore*, et c'est un des sens de mon titre. Peut-être arriverai-je ainsi à faire sortir du nouveau sur la sexualité féminine. (74-5).

Lacan admits to a one-sidedness in his approach to sexuality thus far in his thinking. He even begins the seminar with a self-recrimination that he discerned in the movement of his thinking after his *Ethics* seminar, a certain “*je n'en veux rien savoir*” (9). In his *Ethics* seminar he had articulated that the speaking subject's cause of guilt was giving up on his desire: “Je propose que la seule chose dont on puisse être coupable, au moins dans la perspective analytique, c'est d'avoir cédé sur son désir” (368). As we have already seen, Lacan principally thought of desire

in relation to the phallus, i.e., the signifier. But the signifier functions not simply to indicate lack (desire) but also the possibility of refinding what has been lost—if only fantasmatically and only partially. Tracy McNulty explains: “the function of the signifier is closely linked to the pleasure principle: both maintain a distance from *das Ding* [what functions structurally as the ultimate object of desire] while promising ‘little’ jouissances that would compensate for it” (213). To not give up on one’s desire then would mean in one sense not to confuse the objects one can enjoy with the object of one’s desire. One’s desire is without object; to not give up on one’s desire means not to give up on one’s lack. Why does this ethic not suffice where “woman” is concerned?

Because her relation to the signifier which links desire to an object is different. Her relation to the phallus is such that she does not fully participate in the fantasy that her lack can be resolved through object enjoyment. In Freudian terms, she knows she is castrated; castration is not a threat that propels her into the logic of the pleasure principle where one is invited to compromise on one’s desire. We will return to this issue, but first we must address how Lacan rethinks “man” and “woman” as he addresses what is specific to woman’s experience. In *Encore*, Lacan identifies the object of his enquiry: “que j’ai appelé les hommes, les femmes et les enfant, ça ne veut rien dire comme réalité pré-discursive. Les hommes, les femmes et le enfants, ce ne sont que des signifiants” (34). In using the words “man” and “woman,” Lacan is not referring to a prediscursive, brut reality of sexed bodies but reads them as signifiers. Lacan reminds his listeners that the signifier “se caractérise de représenter un sujet pour un autre signifiant” (48). By evoking the terms “man” and “woman” as signifiers, Lacan is interested in how they represent subjects. His reasons for doing so have to do with how he reads sexual difference. In his 1972 televised interview published under the title *Télévision*, Lacan says that sex is an

impasse. The sexual relation is where the subject butts up against the structural impossibility of total enjoyment exactly because it is in there that the subject expects to overcome his or her sense of lack. Confronted with this impossibility, the subject creates or finds what Lacan calls “myths” to account for this impossibility: “Le mythe,” he says, “c’est ça, la tentative de donner forme épique à ce qui s’opère de la structure” (51). Hence when Lacan reads the various social forms in which sexuality exists, he reads them for what they reveal about the impossibility of attaining full enjoyment: “L’impasse sexuelle secrète les fictions qui rationalisent l’impossible dont elle provient. Je ne les dis pas imaginées, j’y lis comme Freud l’invitation au réel qui en répond” (51). Here Lacan is speaking specifically about the fiction that we are sexually repressed due to social regulation of sexuality, but in the *Encore* seminar he also speaks about masculinity and femininity as two ways of rendering sexual relation impossible, “*deux manières de la rater, l’affaire, le rapport sexuel*” (53). In other words, I would suggest, Lacan reads “man” and “woman” in their social dimension as fictions in which an impossibility is expressed—more specifically where the impossibility of totality is expressed in two ways²⁰. So he enters, as it were, into the common cultural expressions of sexual identities to extract from them two impasses.

He writes these two impasses in the formulae of sexuation to be found in the upper two quadrants of the graph of sexuation (found on page 73 of the French edition of *Encore*):

²⁰ For a discussion of how the formulae of sexuation each express the impossibility of totality, see Joan Copjec’s “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason” in her book *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historians*.

| | | | |
|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| $\exists x$ | $\overline{\Phi x}$ | $\overline{\exists x}$ | $\overline{\Phi x}$ |
| $\forall x$ | Φx | $\overline{\forall x}$ | Φx |
| S | | $S(A)$ | |
| Φ | | $L\alpha$ | |
| | | | |

To briefly gloss the formulae... The left side represents masculine logic. The first line reads, “There is some x (at least one) that is not under the phallic function” while the second line reads “All x are under the phallic function.” The right side represents feminine logic. It reads, “There are not some x (there is not one x) that are not under the phallic function” and “Not all x are under the phallic function.” Both sides thus expressing a logical impasse.

For the moment, what interests me about these formulae is that Lacan arrives at them through a consideration of the fictions of sexual difference. Why then speak of these formulae in terms of masculine and feminine? Having arrived here at the real at work in these fictions, why not discard the fictions? The Lacanian scholar Russell Grigg argues that we can:

The *pas-tout* is a logical category, invented by Lacan, that is best taken as a formulation of a non-universalizable nothing. If we do this then we see, first, that the *pas-tout*, and thus the formulas of sexualization in general, have no intrinsic link with the field of sexuality but are independent of it. This is the radical novelty of the approach; the formulas tell us something about the nature of sexuality precisely because they do not attempt to say what

sexuality is. That is why [...] they can legitimately be applied to different fields. (54)

For Grigg, Lacan has, through his thinking on sexual difference, formulated a logical notation of failed totalizations; having been formulated, these writings are free to be disengaged from the field of sexuality. But I also think this is why, as we shall see, Lacan says that any speaking being is free to inscribe him or herself within either one of the impasses. The formulae of sexuation are not determined by anything like gender, anatomy, or object choice nor do they determine the same categories. In fact, they write how these categories fail to name the sexed subject.

On the other hand, the common expressions of sexual difference do come into play once we drop to the bottom two quadrants of the graph. Here Lacan reads how the two sexual positions play out their distinct impasses in how they fail to relate to one another in the very act of trying to. Lacan maps out the comedy of the sexes: a man does not enjoy a woman but the object that she embodies; a woman does not enjoy a man but the phallus he represents for her. In the bottom portion of the graph, the phallus should be understood not in its dimension as the signifier of the effect of the signifier (castration, loss, desire) but in its dimension of anchoring enjoyment. While I think that Lacan does take as his model the most recognizable of sexual relations, the heterosexual one, this does not preclude the two failures of relation from being taken up in a non-normative relation. A man could just as easily take up the position of the object and a woman that of desiring subject. Taken together, the upper and lower quadrants of the graph represent the real and the fictive (imaginary) expressions of sexual difference.

In the formulae, Lacan writes that there is a singular function to which all speaking beings must submit, but he also argues that one can wholly inscribe one's enjoyment in that function or not wholly inscribe one's enjoyment therein. To inscribe one's enjoyment entirely

there means to take up a relation to a limit, to inscribe oneself in a closed set, which is defined by an exception that falls outside it (*Encore* 74). It should be recalled that this is the structure of the masculine fantasy: there “is” no exceptional figure who enjoys completely; it only appears within the fantasy. It is tempting to read the failure of non-hierarchical social configurations or indeed the complacency in the face of obscene class inequality as an effect of the operation and investment in this exceptional figure: in a social situation which ensures inequality, one is free to imagine that one’s lack is due to the exceptional few who seem to enjoy without restraint. But even as Lacan speaks of men and males in relation to this closed set and its figure of exception, Lacan says that women are free to inscribe their enjoyment entirely there as well. He remarks: “On s’y range, en somme, par choix—libre aux femmes de s’y placer si ça leur fait plaisir. Chacun sait qu’il y a des femmes phalliques...” (67). Masculinity in Lacanian terms has to be understood less in terms of gender or anatomical specificity and more in terms of the logic of one’s enjoyment—by whether it adheres to a limit.

Historically, masculinity (as logic of enjoyment) has been associated with men. Indeed, if Lacan maintains this association, it is not to ignore the social reality that the pursuit and obtaining of objects has until quite recently been the province of men—particularly in the field of sexuality. In this social situation, “woman appears either as a possible embodiment of *das Ding* for a man (and therefore as what is held at bay by the signifier) or as a ‘pleasurable’ substitute object” (McNulty 213). To the extent that men still enjoy phallically, “woman” still appears as a being to be pursued in the search for enjoyment or to be kept at a distance. But Lacan is neither simply describing a social situation nor prescribing one; he is trying to bring to the fore a subjective logic that he sees at work in these relations in the social order. If masculinity is a subjective logic, then it is a logic that any subject regardless of gender or

anatomical sex can inhabit. I would argue that in our day masculinity is no longer so securely tied to men nor is it to be simply identified with normative sexuality.

Lacan's theory that sexuation is a subjective logic to be discerned at work in one's mode(s) of enjoyment moves masculinity and femininity beyond questions of sexual normativity. Both masculine and feminine subjects can be normative and non-normative. One is not to be equated with the status quo and the other with the possibility of new sexualities. The increasing acceptance of queer sexualities and identities does not indicate a surpassing or a leaving behind of the phallic function. Lacan equates sexual enjoyment with what he calls phallic *jouissance*: "La jouissance, en tant que sexuelle, est phallique" (*Encore* 14). In other words, where we find sexual enjoyment, we find the phallus functioning. In this sense, queer sexualities are phallic, and to the extent that any queer identity is seen as an expression of (a) sexuality, then there is an attempt to give a phallic signification to it.²¹ I see in Lacan's concept of the phallus not the

²¹ I am indebted to Kristine Klement for this insight. In her article "Feminism Beyond Hysteria: Reading Feminine Ethics," she writes:

It is crucial that we do not take feminine *jouissance* as some positive content, as some "other" sexuality. As soon as a form of the Other *jouissance* becomes socially acceptable, it is reabsorbed by the patriarchal social symbolic, becoming phallic *jouissance*. Feminists have tried to make the diffuse, multiple, bisexual, and other directed qualities of feminine sexuality part of the social scene in women's only spaces like women's centres, women's communes, and women's festivals. But this feminine imaginary never escapes being structured by the phallic signifier. What is overlooked is that "sexuality" itself is what divides us into men and women, masculine and feminine and produces the qualities attributed to the sexes/sexualities. Sexuality is phallic, it cannot be separated from the phallic signifier, for it is the result of the phallic signifier; it is the pleasure taken in those partial drives which is made allowable by the social scene. Feminine *jouissance* is not some other way of being sexual. Feminine *jouissance* must instead be understood as an experience of *jouissance* that is not captured by our sex/gender/sexuality system; it is Real and escapes symbolization entirely. Sexuality is phallic; there is no separating the two. Which means that man is the subject of sexual desire and Woman is the object. The Woman is the S(A), and as a result the feminine is the bearer of the not-all of being, the *jouissance* that is not phallic, if it can even be said to exist.

operation of a formal element that reproduces traditional heterosexuality, as Butler would argue, but the operation of one that renders sexuality sensical to others. Sensical is not to be confused with traditional or heterosexual. In “La signification du phallus” Lacan remarks that if the phallus is a signifier, then it is in the Other that the subject has access to it (171). The phallus is not a signifier that each subject creates out of a nothing; it is a signifier that he encounters in the Other as the signifier of the Other’s desire and then fantasizes that he himself has. If the phallus is the most privileged of signifiers, it is because it is the most common (i.e., shared by all) of signifiers. Structurally, there must be a common sign of sexual desire. Otherwise, there is no possibility of addressing that desire to an other and having it recognized. Put another way sexual desire is a desire for a recognizable desire, one that makes sense to others. This is why I would argue that queer sexualities to the extent that they are thought of primarily as sexualities are simply phallic. But this is also why I would argue that what the phallus functions to ensure cannot be equated with traditional sexual norms; rather, it functions to ensure (sexual) meaning as common, as something that we can all recognize. In a recent collection of psychoanalytic terms published by Lacan’s institutional inheritors, L’École de la cause freudienne, the phallus is explained thus: “C’est le référent qui donne du sens au monde” (Scilicet 266). Perhaps here we

Because of the historical fact of patriarchy, women have been more likely than men to suffer from hysteria and to have an experience of the Other *jouissance* as that which disrupts their ego’s day to day. Feminists therefore must address this other *jouissance*. But when one makes this other *jouissance* sexual, it comes under the sway of the phallic signifier and the pleasure principle. When one ties this *jouissance* to the experience of particular bodies, it becomes essentialized and particularized. Sexual *jouissance* is phallic *jouissance* is pleasure. The Other *jouissance* is beyond the realm of pleasure/unpleasure. It is the experience of the rupture of one’s being in the face of the insufficiency of the signifier. If there is anything that we can learn from the hysteric it is that the experience of the Other *jouissance* is anything but pleasant. It is a rupture in the natural logic of the organism as well as the ego’s social narrative.

find another way to understand the universalizing function of the phallus, how it is that it creates the universal All. Rather, as the phallus is not the cause of anything but is a structural element, it would be more apt to say that as meaning appears to be universal, there is, Lacan seems to be arguing, a signifier that marks that, a signifier common to all. To inscribe one's enjoyment *entirely* under the common signifier is to seek only enjoyments meaningful to the Other—even those that are transgressive.

The phallic function then indicates that there is a structural (and not simply social) limit within which shared meaning and recognizable desire is possible, and masculinity is a subjective logic that reveals itself in an individual's relation to that limit. What then of femininity? It too must be understood as a subjective logic that reveals itself in an individual's relation to the phallic function, but it is distinguished by its being not-all in relation to that limit. Again, here, femininity cannot simply be equated with women or females, but Lacan does privilege women as feminine subjects.

With this in mind, I return to my initial question: why is an ethics of not giving up on one's desire insufficient for the feminine subject (and not necessarily a female)? Because, Lacan argues, she (or he) is not-all under the phallic function where desire appears to have a solution in objects. With the concept of the not-all, Lacan changes his perspective from looking at woman as the object of phallic desire to looking at the subjectivity at work in the position of the object. By enquiring after this subject, Lacan is able to see how it speaks to the limits of the phallic signifier in rendering all enjoyment meaningful. The feminine subject attests to an enjoyment that is unaccounted for within the phallic function; in so doing, she attests not to the lack in femininity but to the lack or deficiency in the phallus. However, the feminine subject is not to be confused with the exceptional figure that appears in the masculine formula of sexuation, the one x who

would not be under the phallic function. She does not escape the effects of the signifier thereby experiencing a full enjoyment (though this certainly is a fantasy that she and others may entertain). Lacan clarifies: “Ce n’est pas parce qu’elle est pas-toute dans la fonction phallique qu’elle y est pas du tout. Elle y est *pas* pas du tout. Elle y est à plein. Mais il y a quelque chose en plus” (69). The feminine subject is entirely in the phallic function but she is there as not-whole. The phallic function fails to constitute her as an other One, as an other sex. Indeed, in my own thinking of the not-all, I hear it as the “not-One”—neither zero nor some other number, just not (the) One that the phallus designates.

Historically, “woman” is the signifier that designates this not-One, and this is perhaps another reason why Lacan situates the not-all on the side of femininity. Until quite recently, women were neither entirely countable nor entirely accountable sexually, legally, politically, religiously, or financially. Lacan’s point is that this does not prevent them from being subjects, but it does suggest that the subject persists without the support of the ego that these social discourses serve to bolster. But, then, might the not-all be gotten rid of if we were to reconfigure the social such that all were designated equally? Lacan’s argument is not that some discourses or some social configurations are excluding, but that an excess, a “quelque chose en plus” is created by the signifier itself. “Woman” is an expression of this excess. There is not something intrinsic to females that creates this excess. Lacan is rather reading the signifier “woman” to determine how it functions, and he finds that it serves to designate a lack in the signifying order where an excess may appear.

To inscribe oneself in the pas-tout leaves one open to this excess. The hysteric’s somatic symptoms, for example, speak to an excess that takes over the body due to a failure of the signifying order. They speak to an inadequacy of the signifier to anchor the body in the field of

(common) meaning. But even as the hysteric's experience attests to this inadequacy, her strategy is ultimately one of addressing it to an Other who would repair it. In so doing, she attempts to cover over a structural impossibility by rendering an Other responsible for it. Lacan, however, does not equate femininity with hysteria, even if hysteria is a certain experience of femininity. He posits that being not-all under the phallic function opens the way for a supplemental enjoyment not recognizable by the phallic signifier. He points to the writings of mystics like St. Theresa of Avila or John of the Cross as places where we can read an uncommon enjoyment at work in these speaking subjects' experience.

In the lower right quadrant of the graph of sexuation, this uncommon enjoyment is written as $S(\bar{A})$, which Lacan reads as S barred A and by which he "désigne rien d'autre que la jouissance de la femme" (78). In Lacanian notation, S barred A denotes the signifier of the lacking and absent Other. Right away we can see why hysteria and femininity cannot be equated. Through her address to an Other for a solution to her excess, the hysteric demonstrates that, for her, the Other is not absent. Femininity, then, would be an experience not simply of the inadequacy of the phallic signifier (which the hysteric certainly knows) but also an enjoyment, beyond complaint, of the Other as absent. Hysteria is a subjective logic whereby the Other is maintained as an imagined real addressee (God, doctors, parents, lovers) while femininity is one in which the Other is encountered as structural, as absolutely Other. Thus the feminine subject is without any ready-made recourse in dealing with the excess to which she is exposed, which means that she is free to find or fashion her own signifier of enjoyment. As such, it would be uncommon, unrecognizable by all as a marker of enjoyment. But whatever it may be, it would not be sexual for that would be to reinscribe it within the phallic signifier. Because it is not (phallically) sexual, her enjoyment escapes meaning as guaranteed by the phallus. Lacan remarks

that the feminine subject herself perhaps knows nothing about this enjoyment: “Il y a une jouissance à elle dont peut-être elle-même ne sait rien, sinon qu’elle l’éprouve—ça, elle le sait. Elle le sait, bien sûr, quand ça arrive” (69). How can she know that she experiences and yet know nothing about it? Because, Lacan says, “depuis le temps qu’on les supplie, qu’on les supplie à genoux [...] d’essayer de nous le dire, eh bien, motus! On n’a jamais rien pu en tirer. Alors on l’appelle comme on peut, cette jouissance, *vaginale*, on parle du pôle postérieur du museau de l’utérus et autres conneries” (69-70). The problem that this enjoyment presents to those who experience it (and to those who have been looking for it) is made clear here: language is inadequate to it. Language cannot recognize enjoyment as other than phallic; therefore, attempts to name an other one sexualize it, reducing it to a question of enjoying from a different genital site, for example. In other words, the experience of the inadequacy of the phallus is linked to an experience of the limits of language as a site of shared meaning.

In Lacan’s theory of femininity, then, we move far from Freud’s account of genital sightings, penis envy, and babies. Even as he retains the centrality of the phallus in his account of sexual difference, he considerably rewrites Freud’s theory—bringing out sexuality’s entanglement in meaning and its absence, social recognition and its absence—and he transforms Freud’s original insights by enquiring after femininity from her view of the phallus, reconceived as signifier. However, in considering Lacan’s reworking of Freud’s theory of femininity, it is striking that Lacan has nothing to say about the girl. Freud’s accounts of becoming a woman, or rather, of assuming femininity are marked by his efforts to impress upon readers the difficulty of the girl’s task. He writes: “A woman of [thirty] often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability [...] as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned” (“Femininity” 167). The difficulty of her task also

means it is a precarious one whose success, we have seen, is in no way guaranteed. But if she does succeed in achieving full femininity, she must traverse a tale full of jealousy, fear, anger, betrayal, and disappointment. In comparison to this tortuous account, Lacan's "developmental narrative" seems almost cavalier, as though becoming a woman were a matter of choosing teams: "...lorsque un être parlant quelconque se range sous la bannière des femmes..." (93). Becoming a Lacanian woman appears to be refreshingly uncomplicated—something along the order of walking through the door marked "Femmes." And yet there is a hint that femininity is not so easily achieved in Lacan's account either. As I have argued, hysteria is one experience of femininity, but it is not the experience that Lacan develops in the *Encore* seminar. Here he is trying to elaborate a specifically "feminine" enjoyment beyond hysteria where the Other loses its imaginary dimension and is experienced as absent, but he specifies, "Ça ne leur arrive pas à toutes" (69). The suggestion seems to be that femininity proper (an experience that Lacan calls "au-delà du phallus" (69)) is not an experience of all feminine subjects. It is not simply by virtue of taking up the banner of femininity that one accedes to a properly feminine experience.

The question, then, that Lacan's rethinking of Freud raises for me is how does one become a woman? And what might the girl who disappears in Lacan's account have to tell us about taking up the feminine position? On one hand, these questions would seem to move outside the problematic of sexuation as Lacan conceives it. His structural reading of sexuation means that he only reads the effects of *already* being sexed. To be a speaking subject and to participate in the social is to be sexuatered; it is to have taken a position in relation to what language and the social offer the subject by way of recompense for the loss they also impose. Because it is reducible to neither anatomy nor gender, sexuation can only be read through its effects, as a logic in the impasses that determine the individual's experience of what is possible. With this in mind, it cannot be read as a developmental narrative; moreover, there would

seem to be no reason to privilege the girl in enquiring after femininity as a subjective sexuation. On the other hand, since sexuation is not determined in advance but by choice, it seems appropriate to ask if the occurrence of this choice might not be marked in the subject's history, much like Freud's theory that the masculine and feminine situations were set into motion by seeing the genitals of the opposite sex? Furthermore, even as Lacan insists on the non-biological and non-cultural status of sexuation, he does seem to expect that men/males and women/females²² are more likely to be masculine and feminine subjects, respectively. For my part, what strikes me as most useful in Lacan's reading of sexual difference is not that it allows us to move beyond considerations of sexed bodies and identity (though it does) but that it allows us to read a subjective logic at work in these embodied identities. I will argue that the girl expresses a specific subject position, one in which the not-all comes to be.

Returning to my initial discussion of how becoming a woman is currently theorized, I argued "woman" has been evacuated of the possibility of designating being; it can only designate becoming. But this is because "woman" is only considered from our accepted modes of existence: the body and meaning. By redefining "woman" as a subjective position in relation to the phallic signifier, Lacan allows her something more than (mere) existence. But how might one become a woman beyond mere existence and beyond hysteria? To answer this, I will turn to Alain Badiou.

Femininity and Event

With his theory of the event, subject, and truth procedure, Alain Badiou attempts to think, as Peter Hallward puts it, "how [...] something entirely new can come into the world" (xxi). I contend that in these theories we find the conceptual tools for thinking how one becomes a feminine subject, for as each feminine subject is faced with a un-anchored, un-structured excess beyond the phallus, she experiences her own singularity thereby opening the possibility for something entirely new. My bringing

²² In his discussion of the logic of sexuation in *Encore*, Lacan switches between man/woman and male/female. The reasons for this choice are still unsure to me.

together of Badiou and Lacan on the subject of feminine subjectivity cannot occur, however, without a certain infidelity to both of them. Badiou, of course, himself already has a theory of femininity within his framework of event and truth procedure, but mine will deviate considerably from this. To map out where I differ, I will begin with a brief consideration of Badiou's own articulation of femininity.

One of the more surprising pronouncements that Alain Badiou makes in his *Manifeste pour la philosophie* is that love is a truth procedure that makes the Two of sexual difference available to thought (citation). The surprising nature of this assertion owes to its apparent contradiction of the generally held position within the American academy that sexual difference has been "deconstructed" and thought away and yet Badiou has recently gathered considerable acclaim within that very academy. Does the interest in Badiou signal a new turn in the general approach to sexual difference? It could be that one of the factors latently motivating the prominence that Badiou has attained is the possibility of reanimating thinking about the problematic persistence of the "two sexes" despite considerable critique, but, for the time being, this possibility remains (not surprisingly) unaddressed for the most part by Badiou's interlocutors within the American context.

On the other hand, the little interest shown in Badiou's account of sexual difference could owe to its ultimately proposing nothing contrary to the status quo thinking. Indeed, in his approach to sexual difference, his emphasis is much less on the *difference* between the sexes and more on the space where their difference is treated: i.e., love. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Tracy McNulty argue that Badiou's theory of love actually serves to reconstitute a universal humanity where the division of sexual difference (that psychoanalysis posits) is resolved.²³ MacCannell sees the general acceptance of "Badiou's formalization of Love" as "perhaps a

²³ Juliet Flower MacCannell. "Alain Badiou: Philosophical Outlaw." Tracy McNulty. "Feminine Love and the Pauline Universal." Both in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*. Ed. Gabriel Riera.

function of a hidden wish to solve the Woman problem” (176). Accordingly, the latent wish in thinking sexual difference reanimated by Badiou’s treatment could be to think away from a new angle its troubling divisiveness. With this in mind, it seems not without importance that Badiou articulates his theory of love in response to Lacan’s assertion that love makes up for the absence of sexual relation.²⁴ That is, Badiou responds to a thinker who holds that sexual difference cannot be overcome.

Joan Copjec points out that Lacan’s choice of the French word “suppléer” in his statement “Ce qui supplée au rapport sexuel, c’est précisément l’amour” (*Encore* 59), while giving the idea of “to make up for,” also makes reference to an older use of the word. It is “a term plucked from the obscurity of eighteenth-century French rhetoric where it was used as a synonym for *catachresis*. Suppleance [*sic*] names a term that substitutes itself not (as in the case with other tropes) for another prior term, but for an absence” (“Gai Savoir” 123).²⁵ Badiou himself draws attention to the word’s polysemy when he writes in his “Qu’est-ce que l’amour?” essay: “l’amour, je le crois, ne supplée à rien. Il *supplémente*, ce qui est tout différent.” (256). Badiou is attuned to the new possibilities that Lacan’s formulation opens up in thinking about love; particularly, it allows love to be thought in other terms than of the One. Our conception of love, as Badiou points out, has traditionally involved the rendering of the sexual couple as a fusional One (finding one’s other half), the finding of the Same in the Other (loving oneself in the beloved; love as narcissism), or the illusory dressing-up of sexual desire/sexual instinct.²⁶ The

²⁴ In his “La scène du deux” essay, Badiou begins: “On peut concevoir tout ce qui va suivre comme un commentaire de l’énoncé de Lacan selon lequel l’amour vient suppléer qu manqué de rapport sexuel.”

²⁵ From “Gai Savoir Sera.” In *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*.

²⁶ Indeed, this last conception is the one that currently most predominates. With the rise of evolutionary biology and its entrance into the mainstream media, the most “enlightened” view about love has become the most cynical one: love is an evolutionary development to ensure the

idea of the supplement, however, allows for the Two; that is, it does not create the One (of eros), making up for its absence. Instead, it is the inscription in the symbolic of the One's absence. In other words, it does not produce a relation where there is none but marks the very absence of this relation guaranteeing the space for the Two. Love is, Badiou, writes "la scène du Deux."

Thus, Badiou's interest in love would seem to be precisely to uphold the Two of sexual difference. Indeed, he employs the terms "homme" and "femme" to speak about the "deux positions de l'expérience" that love supplements. However, he makes clear that his use of the terms "est strictement nominaliste: nulle distribution empirique, biologique, sociale n'est ici de mise" (257). Badiou is not talking about commonplace notions of "man" and "woman." What, then, distinguishes the two positions for Badiou? How do the sexes differ in Badiou's conceptual framework?

In the two essays where Badiou most directly and succinctly elucidates his thinking on love and sexual difference, i.e., "Qu'est-ce que l'amour?" and "La scène du Deux," the two sexes appear as positions of experience that are totally disconnected from each other. In this, he follows Lacan's claim that "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel." There is no coincidence between the two positions, but, for Badiou, this is simply the state of the situation. Badiou's assertion that love is a process that gives us structural knowledge of the two and not amorous consciousness is important to his theory as a whole, I would suggest, for what we see Badiou grappling with in his thinking on love is how to overcome the most obvious and persistent of differences. How can truths be available to all humanity if humanity is not singular? Badiou's move is not to deny sexual difference but to think the space, the procedure where that difference can be neutralized.

continuation of the species (whether through reproduction or through the cementing of social bonds to ensure cooperation.) Perhaps more interesting is the current trend to think of love as a chemical process in the brain. Why do we experience euphoria in love? The brain's release of dopamine when in the presence of the Beloved.

To think of love as a procedure where an investigation of the world is carried “from the perspective of the Two” is to place the Two on a common mission, to have their difference structured by the service to a common truth. They each pronounce on the difference but one logically, the other ontologically. There are two experiences of the same disjunct.

In Badiou’s thinking, femininity appears on the other side of an event, the amorous encounter, which introduces the void, the unknown of the disjunction, into the situation. The person who responds to this event by sustaining the Two in its wandering takes up the “woman” position. By “sustaining the Two in its wandering,” I understand Badiou to mean that the process of love demands a figure who will prevent the Two from being codified, from being fixed. The “woman” position ensures that one can never say, “This is the Two.” She ensures that the situation never catches up to the Two. When Badiou writes that “woman’s knowledge [organizes its judgments] with the nothing that is the Two,” he points exactly to woman’s insistence that the Two is never represented in the situation, it is always nothing in the situation itself. She complains, she is never satisfied.

In the “Qu’est-ce que l’amour?” essay, Badiou states:

La position “homme” soutient le scindé du Deux, cet entre-deux où se fixe le vide de la disjonction. La position “femme” soutient que le Deux perdure dans l’errance. [...] Le savoir d’homme ordonne ses jugements au *rien* du Deux. Le savoir de femme au *rien aue* le Deux. On pourrait dire aussi, la sexuation des savoirs de l’amour disjoint:

1) l’énoncé véridique masculine suivant: “Ce qui aura été vrai est que nous étions deux et non pas du tout un”;

2) l'énoncé féminin, non moins véridique, que voici: "Ce qui aura été vrai est que deux nous étions et qu'autrement nous n'étions pas."

L'énoncé féminin vise l'être comme tel. Tel est en amour sa destination, qui est ontologique. L'énoncé masculin vise le changement du nombre, l'effraction douloureuse de l'Un par la supposition du Deux. Il est essentiellement logique.

Le conflit des saviors dans l'amour exhibe que l'Un d'une vérité s'expose toujours à la fois comme logique et comme ontologique" (269).

The two positions "man" and "woman" are positions of experience that are in the Two that love produces by its fixing of a void at the center of a seeming relation. There is sexual difference for Badiou because there are two experiences, two *savoirs* produced in love that are absolutely non-related. The Two that love marks are an imminent Two and not two Ones whom love yokes together. This is why even homosexual love produces "sexed" positions. Sexes differ because they have different *savoirs* about the Two that love guarantees. The absence whose place love maintains does not permit the two positions to have the same knowledge, to share the same experience of love (and not because, for example, every experience is individual but because the absence that love declares is one of absolute non-relation). As Peter Hallward puts it: "These two positions are adopted as incommensurable responses to the event of the loving encounter" (188). Love produces two irreconcilable positions but each attests to a common truth: we are two. One position attests to it logically, the other ontologically. Sex, then, in Badiou's schema is an enunciative position that one assumes in relation to the supplement of love whose declaration marks an absence, a non-relation at the center of the couple's relation. It is not because we are sexed beings that we fall in love but we are sexed beings *because* we fall in love. Taking his cue

from Beckett's representation of the figures that issue from love, Badiou writes: "les sexes ne préexistent pas à la rencontre amoureuse, [...] ils en ont bien plutôt le résultat" (*Beckett* 56).

Lacan, on the other hand, holds that sexual difference is the product of a choice in the subject's encounter with the one signifier of desire. In Lacan's account, one could make the argument that love marks the absence of the sexual relation, but Lacan holds that love is a response to this absence: sexual difference precedes the amorous encounter (though it may be in the amorous relationship that the individual most poignantly experiences the real of sexual difference). However, Badiou's account of an evental encounter that produces a sexed subject does have much to offer Lacan's theory of femininity. How so?

Badiou articulates his theory of event, subject, and truth in relation to his ontology, which I will not presume to account for entirely as the advanced mathematics²⁷ that he uses remain still uncertain for me, but I will draw out the most pertinent points for the purposes of my discussion. Badiou's ontology is based on a foundational claim: "l'un *n'est pas*" (*L'être* 31). The one has no being; however, the one exists as an operation, a count for one, as the presentation of being. If the one is simply an operation, then we can deduce that it operates on a multiple, being *qua* being. Peter Hallward explains: "we know as a matter of necessary implication that since every existent one has come to be merely as the effect of some particular counting for one, what *is* (what is thereby counted) must be not-one, that is, purely or inconsistently multiple" (91). What Badiou calls a situation comprises this inconsistent multiple and a consistent multiple, "établie dans le partage du compte-pour-un, l'inconsistance en amont, la consistance en aval" (33). The inconsistent multiple as pure multiple, however, is not presented in the situation since only what

²⁷ An explanatory discussion of the set theory that Badiou employs can be found in an appendix to Peter Hallward's introduction to Badiou, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, as well as in Ed Pluth's introduction *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*, pp. 39-45.

is counted exists. Hence, Badiou argues that from within the situation “le multiple pur, absolument imprésentable selon le compte, ne soit *rien*” (66). But even if the situation excludes access to the inconsistency structured by the count, this inconsistency haunts the situation as its repressed, as it were. This repressed inconsistency (pure multiple, being *qua* being) which lurks (“rôde”) in the situation Badiou names the void, *le vide* (68). The void can never be presented, be counted, because it is “la défaillance de l’un, le pas-un, en un sens plus originaire que le pas-du-tout” (69), but it can be detected. For this detection to take place, “il faut un dysfonctionnement du compte, lequel s’induit d’un excès-d’un. L’événement sera cet ultra-un d’un hasard, d’où le vide d’une situation est rétroactivement décelable” (69).

The event is the term in Badiou’s framework that indicates that what *is*, the count can be disrupted. It marks that the count can fail. But the event is only one side of the equation: for the event to have an effect on the situation, i.e., “forcer la situation elle-même à confesser son vide, et faire ainsi surgir, de l’être inconsistent et du compte interrompu, l’éclat non-étant d’une existence” (204), there has to be an intervention. There has to be someone who names the event and who labors for the new possibility that it introduces, for the situation itself cannot recognize the event. In his book *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou’s Minimalist Metaphysics*, Sam Gillespie argues that, in fact, the event “is a subjective category, while ontology is not” (95). It is more correct to say that the event can only take on its status as event if it causes subjectivation from which ensues a truth procedure and its subject. The truth procedure and the subject should be understood as two sides of the same coin: the subject is the support for the truth procedure (429). The truth procedure itself serves to determine what the count has rendered inconsistent. Gillespie provides a succinct description of this process, of the move from situation to truth, ontology to subject:

The very problematic status of the event in Badiou hinges upon a paradox: on the one hand, there is an excess of being over presentation; on the other hand, this excess is purely nothing. How can nothing present itself? Precisely insofar as there are events that are given form by those subjects who recognize them. ... [Events are] what one could call ‘supplements’ to presentation itself that makes the move from a purely subtractive theory of presentation to a direct determination of the indeterminate possible. That is, the event is what facilitates a movement from a negative ontology (in which the question of inconsistency remains a negative determination of something that is subtracted from presentation) to a positive determination of that subtracted inconsistency qua production of truths. (110-11)

Badiou’s theoretical framework that moves from situation to truth gives us logical sequence to begin to think what it might mean to become a woman in Lacan’s account of femininity. Badiou argues that all that is has undergone an operation, a count-for-one. This count, however, does not present being as being. The count creates a situation wherein the presentation of being is haunted by an excess, the void, that the situation prohibits and cannot recognize. However, something of this excess can irrupt into the situation, opening up the possibility for a new subject and a new truth. Similarly, Lacan argues that all the enjoyment (jouissance) that is submitted to the phallus, but the phallus fails to anchor all enjoyment. The phallus creates an excessive remainder that it cannot recognize, but a subject can come to take up the cause, as it were, of this remainder. Indeed, this subject comes to be in taking on this remainder.

To develop these connections further, I will recall that Lacan argues that the phallic function is that to which all speaking beings have been submitted. To enter language and the

functioning of the signifier is to lose the satisfaction of our natural aims and instead to desire. Lacan argues that the phallus is the signifier of this situation. Moreover, the phallus designates what enjoyments are possible in this situation. To be a subject of this situation is to inscribe one's enjoyment within the enjoyment that is. This is to be sexuated as masculine. To move more fully into Badiou's terminology, I would say that human sexuality is a situation where the phallus is the operation of the count-for-one and thus phallic enjoyment exists—human sexuality *is* phallic sexuality. That is the situation we come into when we are counted and count ourselves as sexed beings. This situation in itself does not preclude women from being counted; the phallus does not discriminate. Thus, as we saw, Lacan remarks, “On s’y range, en somme, par choix—libre aux femmes de s’y placer si ça leur fait plaisir” (*Encore* 67). To count oneself fully within the phallic function would also be to count as nothing the excessive remainder generated by the phallic count. In this sense, to be masculine is to be entirely in the phallic situation and thus blind to any eventual eruption that would reveal the contingency of the count. In Badiou's terms, the (Lacanian) masculine subject belongs to the situation and is not a (Badiouian) subject.²⁸

To be a feminine subject, on the other hand, indicates that there is something like a Badiouian subject, for the feminine subject is in the phallic situation but supports a supplement to that situation whereby the phallus is revealed not to name all enjoyment. Drawing this parallel between Lacan's feminine subject and Badiou's subject of a truth process may at first seem nonsensical for the latter's subject cannot be equated with the speaking sexed subject of psychoanalysis. As Ed Pluth in his admirably accessible introduction to Badiou points out,

²⁸ But this distinction does suggest that Badiou's subjects who (insomuch as his subjects might also be speaking beings) can only appear in relation to generic procedures, politics, art, love, science, would be Lacanian masculine subjects. As the masculine subject is entirely within the phallic function, his experience of new possibilities would be in the field opened up by the phallic function: human culture.

Badiou's conception of the subject has changed over the course of the development of his philosophy, but the driving thread through these various conceptions has been that the subject is, as Pluth puts it, "the material correlate of change," "the real presence of change, of novelty, in a situation" (108). As such, unlike in psychoanalysis, a subject, writes Badiou in *L'Être et l'événement*, "est rare" (429). But as the subject is the presence of change, it need not be a person at all; it can be, for example, a series of works of art, as Badiou puts forth in a work following *L'Être et l'événement: L'Éthique*. Here we can see to what extent Badiou's subject is not Lacan's, and I am not arguing that we should equate the two²⁹. At the same time, they do share points in common, and by looking at "the narrative" that Badiou constructs in developing his concept of the subject and its contiguous terms, I argue that we find tools for drawing out more precisely how Lacan's theory of femininity allows us to think how one might become a "woman" beyond her modes of existence.

As I have already argued, femininity, on my reading of Lacan, is best understood as a logic that appears or can be discerned in a speaking subject's relation to what is given as meaningful forms of enjoyment. Hence the first point in common that the Lacanian and Badiouian subjects share is that neither can be equated with consciousness or agency; secondly, both mark or present a truth that the situation and the subject cannot know. A truth, writes Badiou, "est insensiblement insue, qu'elle est, littéralement, un *trou* dans les savoirs" ("La vérité 201). From within language, as we have seen, one cannot know that non-phallic jouissance

²⁹ Badiou, in fact, sees his theory of the subject, though profoundly indebted to Lacan, as moving beyond Lacan. Bruno Bosteels has argued that the thrust of Badiou's critique lies in moving the void from the subject to being and changing the subject's relationship to it. Whereas the Lacanian subject can only momentarily encounter the (too traumatic) void before being reinscribed in the symbolic structure that covers over the void, the Badiouian subject is what gives "being to this very lack" (155). See "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism" in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*.

exists, but one can know that there are subjects who appear to complain about nothing, whose bodies confound the discourses we have for making sense of them, whose lives disrupt the accepted narratives about what they as rational, competent members of advanced, liberal societies should want. But how does a subject come to find himself in this predicament?

Here Badiou's distinction between subjectivation and subject is key. Ed Pluth shows that subjectivation does not necessarily happen to the subject. As the subject is the material presence of truth in a situation, it comprises things like works of art and political pronouncements. Subjectivation, however, requires more than presence: it requires naming, intervention, deciding, and fidelity. If the subject is something like a series of works of art, how can it name and decide? How can it be faithful? Pluth argues that it cannot, but it can show that someone has:

While it is true that the subject in Badiou's philosophy is not the same as consciousness, it would be wrong to say it has nothing to do with consciousness. [...] The subject has something to do with thought, with conscious activity, and even language, because it is in large part a product of such things. It is not a natural object, but a human, historical object.

Being and Event referred to the inhabitants of situations, those who would receive a truth procedure a certain way, finding it to be nonsensical, undecidable, or promising. *Ethics* addresses the same idea in a different way, referring to the inhabitant of a situation as a "some-one" who is possibly split in two, so to speak, by an event. This splitting is the consequence of being affected by an event; as such, it presupposes a subjectivation. [...] The difference between the subject and some-one who inhabits a situation is this: the subject would be the multiple in excess of the some-one affected by an event, in excess of the some-one who has been subjectivated by an event. That there is something of this

some-one left behind, or left out of, subjectivation is where ethics has a job to do, because this difference opens up the space in which it is possible to consider what an individual is going to make of the excess that is occurring through him or her. How do the subjectivated inhabitants of a situation live with an event whose effects are insisting in and disrupting their lives? [...] It is the inhabitants of worlds and situations who are active in their situations, carrying out a truth procedure (or not). A subject is part of what they make. (121-27)

I find this explanation to be extremely helpful in articulating what I see to be so fruitful about Badiou's framework in relation to Lacan's femininity. Here Pluth argues that Badiou allows for a difference between the subject and the individual but both respond to the event. In this difference between the effects of the event (which just happens to the individual) and the reaction to the effects of the event, we find the framing that allows a narrative to come into view. The feminine subject is not simply the presence of a truth (which has nothing to do with the individual) but is also an individual reacting to, judging, deciding how to deal with an event and a truth that disrupts the well-being of the ego.

I want to suggest that the feminine subject who is not-all under the phallus appears there on the other side of an event which can be supposed from within the phallic situation because he or she proceeds there in such a way that cannot be accounted for in its either/or logic (that is, either phallic or not phallic). That is, the feminine subject is a process in relation to an event; thus, one can become "a woman" within the phallic situation. The feminine subject is not a performative effect of gender, but is one who exists in the manner of truth in a situation, one who has more to say (and more to enjoy) than what the phallus can recognize. About what does she speak? About enjoyment, about how it might be had within the phallus without being reduced to

phallic enjoyment, and about the fundamental inadequacy of the signifier to speak all that may be. My intervention will be to return to Lacan's graphs of sexuation in the *Encore* seminar in order in order to read again his writing of feminine *jouissance* in relation to Badiou's notions of truth-procedure and fidelity.

Lacan writes feminine *jouissance* as S barred A. He says very clearly that with this writing he "désigne rien d'autre que la jouissance de la femme" (78). How are we to read this writing?: as "the signifier of the Other" but this Other is barred, both lacking and absent. There are two comments that I want to highlight about "woman's *jouissance*." First, Lacan says, "Ça ne leur arrive pas à toutes" (69) and secondly, "La femme a rapport au signifiant de cet Autre" (75). In other words, while woman (as signifier) is the place where we can find a relation to the signifier of the barred Other, not all women (as individual, speaking subjects) enjoy the signifier of this lacking Other. I take this to mean that one can inscribe oneself on the feminine side of the graph of sexuation (take up the signifier "woman"), one can indentify oneself with the object of phallic enjoyment but one will not necessarily forge a relation to the S barred A. This is the hysteric's position. Yet I would argue that all feminine subjects start here: in the hysteric's position. To experience feminine *jouissance*, to have a relation to the S barred A, something else must occur: a truth procedure. Logically, we can imagine that the feminine subject takes up the feminine position in good faith; she takes up the position of the object in the belief that she is being accounted for. But her hystericization becomes the trace of a vanished event (in which logically the phallus will have failed). The hysteric of course experiences the ravages of not being entirely under the phallus. The psychoanalyst Lucie Cantin explains that not being entirely under the phallus leaves one open to a enjoyment that is not phallic but is not, for all that,

feminine, i.e., au-delà du phallus³⁰. Historically and in our day, the hysteric has made a spectacle of herself, a spectacle addressed to those whom Willy Apollon calls “ceux qui contrôlent le discours dominant au service des maîtres, prêtres, médecins, idéologues et consorts” She demands of them to explain “comment le sujet de la pulsion s’en sort-il du défaut du langage à arraisonner la jouissance” (25). Apollon then claims, “La féminité, qu’il ne faut pas, dans notre problématique, réduire simplement à la condition d’être femme, est le refus éthique de céder sur cette question, quelles que soient les conséquences d’un tel refus pour la coexistence sociale” (25). In other words, in this refusal to give up on this question, the feminine subject will ultimately learn that there is no Other to whom she can address this question. This is part of her truth procedure; in not giving up on this question, I would argue she remains faithful to the failure of the phallus. (And in the process does she not also subject her addressees to the truth that the phallus fails?)

This, however, is only part of the procedure if she is to experience the other jouissance, feminine jouissance—not simply a non-phallic one. It is probable that most feminine subjects remain in hysteria, addressing themselves to master after master or confusing themselves with the signifier of the Other (imaginarily becoming The Woman). In this regard, Apollon offers a

³⁰ In her essay “La féminité: D’une complicité à la perversion à une éthique de l’impossible,” Cantin identifies three other non-phallic jouissances: 1) one that “s’inscrit à *l’encontre* du phallus dans une guerre à finir, ou une lutte ouverte et militante comme celle que nous trouvons dans le discours de certaines féministes radicales ou dans certaines positions subjectives plus ou moins avouées de la lesbienne. Jouissance du même, guerilla contre le pouvoir dominant de tout ce qui se propose comme ordre phallic; 2) “la jouissance maternelle. Jouissance cette fois réservée à la femme qui, dans la proximité silencieuse à l’enfant et pas son pouvoir de refus de la paternité, peut user de l’enfant comme d’un otage dans un jeu de laminage et de haine du phallus; 3) “Jouissance de la pulsion, tournant sur elle-même, qui quête une limite dans le symptôme, dans un objet ou chez un Maître, jouissance ravageante ou fascinante qui prend possession du sujet qui ne peut rien en dire, se trouvant possédé, figé, aliéné mais dans une capture dont ils se font le complice plus ou moins consentant” (48-49).

telling reformulation to his first claim about a feminine ethic: “Nous définissons donc la féminité comme cette exigence éthique d’avoir à solutionner un défaut fondamental du signifiant par rapport à une jouissance “en trop” où l’être du sujet se trouve mis en jeu” (35). Between his first statement and the latter, the feminine subject moves from not giving up on her excessive, non-phallic jouissance to having to solve a defect in the signifier. I would argue that this is where she must produce a signifier or forge a relation to one that would be the signifier of the barred Other. Only then does she accede to feminine jouissance. But in solving the defect of the signifier (by producing a signifier for her jouissance), she must maintain the logic of her initial refusal because not-all of her jouissance can be captured in the signifier—her solution is a make-shift one, but she must have the courage not to relinquish it. In this sense, each feminine subject’s truth procedure repeats a logic (finding a signifier for a jouissance that the phallus has failed to account for), but its repetition is one that necessitates that each one find his or her own signifier. There can be no universal signifier fashioned by a feminine subject that would serve for all other feminine subjects. Each must create one anew and it is exactly here that something inconceivable in the phallic situation occurs: a new signifier of enjoyment. This signifier disturbs the phallic order but the latter always fails to recognize it as signifying an other enjoyment.

The import of this theoretical apparatus is it allows us to reinject “development” into Lacan’s reconceptualization of Freud’s account of becoming a woman. Indeed, it allows us to bring the two thinkers closer together when the trend has been to disentangle them on the question of femininity. Badiou’s sequence of event-subjectivization-fidelity-truth procedure-subject allows us to think again the difficulty that Freud was dealing with in trying to conceptualize femininity and the girl’s “illogical” decision to favor the phallus. Peter Hallward explains that for Badiou

Freud's great achievement [...] was the "eventalization" of childhood, that is, an understanding of childhood not as an innocent parenthesis (a simple "before" adulthood) or a moment of training and development (of "*dressage*"), but rather as a sequence of events whose consequences are duly assumed by the unconscious subject. This allowed for an analysis of thought able to transform itself. Freud's most essential insight was "Something has happened, it cannot be erased, and the constitution of the subject depends on it."³¹ (113)

With this in mind, I want now to turn to the field of the literary. Particularly, I want to turn to the genre of the *Bildungsroman* to theorize a properly feminine one.

A theory of the *female Bildungsroman* has been dropped in the wake of post-structuralist critiques of identity and universality. Writing in 1990, the feminist scholar Carol Lazarro-Weiss looks back on the critical landscape of women's writing and summarizes the various attempts to formulate a *Bildung* narrative that would be proper to women. Having done so, she concludes:

Is there such a thing as a female *Bildungsroman*? Probably not, which is why it has been necessary over the years for many women writers and critics to invent one. And they will most likely continue to do so since the questions surrounding the relationship between experience, subjectivity, and social structures are far from being resolved. (34)

I would have to agree that there is not a *female Bildungsroman*, but I would like to hold open the possibility that there is a *feminine* one. Lacan with Badiou makes it possible to revive this abandoned critical project without also reviving notions of identity and without trying to speak for all women (for all women are not feminine). Moreover, Lacan with Badiou allows us to read the girl's story again beyond the critical lens of gender. Indeed, the preceding theoretical

³¹ Hallward is quoting here from "Théorie axiomatique du sujet: Notes du cours 1996-1998."

dialogue staged between Lacan and Badiou should be read as a response to my encounter with literary texts whose strangeness could not be accounted for by the current dominant paradigm of reading the girl through the lens of gender. Hence the literary is evoked not as the material for theoretical application but is the very stuff that demands that theory be reworked.

***Bildungsroman* and Coming of Age**

Why use, however, the term *Bildungsroman* to describe the genre I want to delineate? The novels I will consider certainly do not fall within its traditional lines. The genre is generally recognized to have begun with Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) and to have reigned as Europe's predominant novel form for the first half of the nineteenth century. Franco Moretti identifies Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, Flaubert's *Une education sentimentale*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Dicken's *David Copperfield* as classics of the genre. The term and its definition are usually attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey, but as the commentator in the *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics* notes: "The term 'bildungsroman' was coined by critic Karl von Morgenstern in the 1820s" (Booker 84). Its identifying characteristics were to "depict the hero's *Bildung* (development) as it begins and proceeds to a certain level of perfection" and to aid "the *Bildung* of the reader to a greater extent than any other type of novel" (Booker 84). Another commentator emphasizes that because "the concept of *Bildung* relies on notions such as cultivation, refinement, awakening and (both upward and forward) movement, critics have renamed the *Bildungsroman* the "novel of formation" with special emphasis on the completion of character; indeed, 'formation' is closest to what the German word, *bildung*, literally means" (Cho 22).

In the girl's traditional *Bildungsroman*, her *Bildung* is synonymous with bride. The inability to reimagine the genre is due in no small part to the disappearance of such a socially

defined feminine position. The loss of a feminine social project is reflected in the literature, where the girl's story is no longer equated with the marriage plot. Indeed, the divorce of the literary girl from the marriage plot is one of the events motivating this study. Around the Second World War, the girl became of interest in her own right. Authors began to treat the girl well below marriageable age as deserving of literary treatment, and the girl's development story became more associated with the idea of coming of age³². While the notion of coming of age preserves some of the characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* (movement, awakening), it loses the stability and finality of *Bildung*. Coming of age suits a critical climate that favors becoming and open-endedness over being and arrival. But this notion of coming of age primarily conceives of the girl in her social dimension as a becoming woman and obscures the other scene staged in these texts. To automatically read the girl's post-marriage plot narrative as a coming of age tale is to miss the radical possibility opened up by the girl's loss of social *telos*. In losing the social position that would mark her as a woman, the girl is exposed to a lacking Other. The writers I will consider are exactly interested in the girl's post-marriage plot narrative for this reason. They all seem to be asking, "What comes into view when the girl is considered apart from her future, i.e., womanhood?" In this sense, the considered texts are not coming of age narratives. They are, rather, *Bildungsroman* where the *Bildung* is not social but eventfully subjective.

Outline of Chapters

Through a reading of three novels, I will consider how they stage an event, subjectivization, fidelity, and feminine subjectivity. The novels deal with three themes that predominate in the girl's story: love and marriage, the body, and sex. I will argue that the girl in

³² In her book *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*, Ruth O. Saxton describes the "new fictions" about the girl as "new plots and narrative renderings of females coming-of-age" and as "*Künstlerroman*, narratives of female coming-of-age" (xi).

each text entirely subjectivizes them, i.e., she dissolves them of their social function, submitting them to her truth procedure.

In the next chapter, “*The Member of the Wedding: The Feminine Subject Adrift*,” I argue that McCullers’s novel portrays marriage as responding to an eventual loss of “being” for the feminine subject. I begin my reading by coming back to *Le Deuxième sexe* to consider Beauvoir’s own reading of McCullers’s novel and how it functions in the development of her argument. In my analysis, I lay out how its plot proceeds from an eventual gap in meaning, *pace* Beauvoir who fills this gap, which cuts the twelve year-old protagonist, Frankie, adrift from her sense of place and self. Frankie’s process of reanchoring herself results in the production of an entirely new possibility within her field of meaning: a three-person marriage. Frankie decides to be a member of her brother’s wedding. Though it is explained to her that this is impossible, that this kind of marriage is not a marriage, Frankie insists that this is the proper referent for her desire. Marriage, despite having been foreclosed as a possibility in the social, effectively returns to indicate a signifying deficiency. Reading back from her solution, I construct the problem in the real that it marks and why marriage, as the novel suggests, ultimately cannot fulfill the promise it seems to hold.

In the third chapter “*Antes: How Bodies Come Undone*,” I claim that the sudden and unexpected demise of the twelve year-old protagonist of Carmen Boullosa’s novel, on the occasion of her menarche is a metaphorical condensation of Esther’s failure to produce a means of marking an eventual eruption of enjoyment in her body. Early in the novel, a group of older girls tickle her, forcing her to laugh though she is terrified. After this, the girl embarks on a project of adequately signifying an unspoken truth that she finds in this experience of her body. Unable ultimately to make her experience signify, her body becomes the mark itself of a

signifying gap. My reading draws out how the girl attempts to make her experience pass through a process of signification, but I read her ultimate falling back on the body as the site of meaning, causing her death, as a cautionary tale against a feminine strategy of doing without the signifier.

In the fourth chapter “*L’Amant: On The Limits of Sex*,” I argue that Marguerite Duras’s novel recounts how her writing comes out of the failure of the sex act to channel an experience of feminine enjoyment. My basic thesis is that her writing serves as a mark in the social of a non-signified experience of femininity. The chapter begins with a consideration of the girl in the Durassian oeuvre in order to chart a sort of working through of the marriage plot in order to tell another story for the girl—the one that appears in *L’Amant*. In this novel, I identify a staging of the sex act as stripped of its social and affective trappings so that the girl may approach it on a plane of “pure enquiry.” I argue that this enquiry is triggered by an eventual encounter with the woman whom Duras will rename Anne-Marie Stretter and who serves as the figure of femininity itself within Duras’s works. I conclude the chapter and the dissertation by proposing that Duras might serve as an example of a properly feminine ethics of the real.

CHAPTER 1

*THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING: THE FEMININE SUBJECT ADRIFT**The Girl and American Literature*

I will start with a provocation: Carson McCullers's 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding* introduces something new into American literature: the girl. Now allow me to qualify my assertion, to dress it so that its baldness can take on an allure. The girl has of course been with us well before 1946.³³ One has only to think of those two well-loved American classics *Little House on the Prairie* and *Little Women* to find my assertion uninformed, to say the least. Nevertheless, *The Member of the Wedding* has some distinguishing characteristics that mark it, and its girl, as different. First, its intended is ambiguous: to whom does it address itself?

The Member of the Wedding tells the story of Frances "Frankie" Addams over four days during the summer of her twelfth year. It begins just hours after her brother introduces his fiancée to the family and Frankie experiences a sudden change that she cannot explain: the couple troubles her somehow. The housekeeper, Berenice, who is also a sort of surrogate mother to Frankie, names what has happened: Frankie has fallen in love with the wedding. The next day she realizes that she wants to join the couple, to be a member of their wedding, and to go away with them. Once Frankie realizes that she belongs to the couple, she spends a euphoric day wandering through her town. The following day the wedding takes place, and Frankie of course learns that she cannot be a member of the wedding. That same evening, Frankie runs away only to be brought back home by her father. The novel ends with a brief epilogue: a year later Frankie has befriended a girl and appears to have forgotten about the wedding.

³³ For a detailed survey of the girl in American literature before 1950 see Barbara A. White's *Growing up Female* and W. Tasker Witham's *The Adolescent in the American Novel*.

A look at the readings this story has solicited is interesting in that the readings are so varied, as if the novel resists and confounds attempts to recognize it. (Interestingly, the great literary critic Edmund Wilson famously avowed that the story left him blank.³⁴) Summing up some of the trends that have emerged in reading the novel, Melissa Free shows up how the novel has a “queerness” about it that critics keep returning to: “What was once, in McCullers criticism, read as universalized loneliness came to be read as the grotesque; next, disparagingly and later affirmatively, as homosexuality or androgyny; and is now read as queer in its broadest sense” (428). While these readings obviously reflect trends in criticism and theoretical concerns, they also reveal that despite the novel’s seeming marginal and trivial subject matter, i.e., the adolescent girl, it emerges as a site of continual interpretive production touching on broader significance. Barbara White suggests that these readings are expressive of an unrecognized discomfort: “The eagerness of critics to make her [Frankie] symbolic suggests some anxiety over the subject of female adolescence” (90). At the same time, she points to a determining factor in the reception of McCullers’s fourth novel: “*The Member of the Wedding*, as the long-awaited novel of a young ‘genius,’ invited more extensive critical response” (91). In other words, as the work of a serious writer of non-trivial subjects, *The Member of the Wedding* appeared from the beginning in the field of literature proper.³⁵ As such, it demanded and continues to demand to be read not as genre or minor literature but as literature *tout court*. It is not without consequence that

³⁴ Wilson, Edmund. “Two Books That Leave You Blank: Carson McCullers, Siegfried Sassoon.” *New Yorker*. (March 1946)

³⁵ McCullers’s first two novels are expansive, even Balzacian in their cast of characters, and deal with challenging themes. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), published when she was only 21 years old, expertly treats several members of a town—men, women, children, black, white, poor, and less poor. Her second novel, written in the space of a few months, *Reflections In a Golden Eye* (1941), enters into the lives of repressed and philandering couples—exploring the weight of unavowable desire. It would eventually be made into a film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando.

unlike many modern novelists McCullers did not begin her career with a coming of age novel colored in shades of autobiography. Instead of the quintessential first novel that must be in some ways got through, *The Member of the Wedding* comes later, suggesting that McCullers's finds in Frankie's story material for the mature and experienced writer to address to the reader of literature. Unlike much literature about children, the novel is intended for a sophisticated reader, and the strangeness that critics continually return to speaks to its literary merit in handling the theme. As one commentator remarked on what makes good literature:

Part of what allows a book to endure, part of what gives a book the power to last, is precisely a sort of opacity, a presence of the veil, that allows, *over time*, all sorts of *heterogeneous* meanings to be *projected* on to the book as we endlessly wonder what it is that is behind the veil. The veil here functions like an engine or productive device that ensures that the text continue to produce meaning for readers and that we return to it again and again.³⁶

I will return to the functioning of opacity in the novel.

The novel also distinguishes itself by circumscribing its protagonist's story. The action, interspersed with flashbacks, transpires over four days, followed by an epilogue occurring in the following year. Therefore, Frankie is only thirteen when we leave her; we do not follow her into adulthood. In her study of what she terms "the novel of adolescence," *Growing Up Female*, Barbara White advances that the production of such stories reflects the introduction of the adolescent into American demographics (44). Before the twentieth century, the adolescent was not seen as a distinct age with its own problems; therefore, the child and the adolescent figure as stages along the way to adulthood: the girl is a "little woman." White identifies Edith Wharton's

³⁶ <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/11/12/objet-a-and-the-veil/#more-4144>

novel *Summer* (1917) as one of the earliest, if not the earliest, appearances of the adolescent girl in American literature. Its protagonist, Charity Royall, is notable from her predecessors due to her rich inner life. Psychologically she is well drawn, and one has the impression of the girl as individual and not social type. It is as much herself as the social arena that she must navigate. As such, at first her fate is in question, her social place uncertain. Nevertheless, the novel follows her through to her final position: marriage and motherhood. It is my hypothesis that McCullers, possibly excepting Henry James with his novel *What Maisie Knew* (which leaves its central character at the age of twelve or thirteen), is the first American novelist to divorce the girl from the marriage plot and to introduce her as a literary figure in her own right.³⁷ That is, I propose that McCullers gives us a new figure of the feminine. No longer does the girl serve didactic purposes in the maintenance of the status quo—which White’s catalogue of the girl’s literary presence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century suggests—now she is written to treat the girl’s introduction to a femininity that lacks a given content.³⁸ The various social determinations of woman are not what is at stake here, which is not to say that earlier novels did not treat femininity (in the sense that I have articulated it in the introduction), but it is to say that femininity is treated in a new way here, its problems disassociated from the traditional social problems specific to being a woman. Writing about the girl in McCullers’s fiction, the critic Leslie Fiedler identifies the new problematic that she stages thus: “It is not the responsibility of womanhood that she reluctantly must take up but the decision to be a woman at all that she must

³⁷ One might, though, not consider James to be an American novelist. It is argued that stylistically he writes in the European idiom and cannot be placed in the lineage of American literature.

³⁸ James’s treatment of Maisie tends toward this usage, as *What Maisie Knew* was meant as an indictment of the laxity of moral codes that James observed in the familial arrangements of the moneyed class. James’s study, though, of Maisie is complex and affecting. See Juliet Flower MacCannell’s reading of Maisie in her book *The Regime of the Brother* for a take on how Maisie does something other than repeat the accepted social narrative for the girl.

make. She is, then sexless, hovering between the two sexes” (qtd. in White 91). Frankie’s story resists being easily recuperated into a larger social narrative that implicitly reaffirms the status quo of what a girl wants and indeed what a girl is for. Frankie is not interested in how to become a wife, a mother, or one of the “good girls” of nineteenth century didactic literature—more particularly she is not even interested in being perceived as feminine. But if we are to say that Frankie’s story stages not entering womanhood but becoming a woman, then we must ask what a woman is in this novel. Indeed, the dominant theoretical impulse is to see “woman” only as a function of “womanhood,” inasmuch as “womanhood” might describe the social parameters and performative acts that render “woman” visible. I want to argue that the crisis the novel stages suggests that “woman” has little to do with questions of visibility and thus recognition of “woman” in the social.

Currently, the trend is to read Frankie as lesbian or queer.³⁹ Elizabeth Freeman in her book *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern America* (2002) calls the novel queer because Frankie’s desire spills out of the usual interpretive models of what girls might want—neither hetero nor homosexual. More recently, Melissa Free has challenged this reading, claiming, “we *can*—and I think should—read *Member* as a ‘lesbian coming of age’ novel” for to do otherwise ultimately tends to “privilege heterosexuality” (437). I find little to contest in either of these readings insofar as we interrogate Frankie’s sexual desire: it seems clear that Frankie does not want what has been designated as desirable in the traditional heterosexist social space. My reading, however, attends to a signifying gap in the novel that readers fail to notice and, in so

³⁹ In an adaptation loosely based on the book, the French film *L’Effrontée* (1985)—starring a fourteen year-old Charlotte Gainsbourg in the lead role—presents the Frankie character as half in love with another girl her age. The film cuts out Frankie’s falling in love with the wedding and rewrites the story to deal with the scenario at the end of the novel. The film does an admirable job of presenting the girl as lost and searching for a connection, but it makes Frankie much more accessible by reinscribing her story in a more recognizable framework.

doing, render Frankie as caught up in the problem of sexuality and the desire it sustains.

The Sudden April

In her assessment of the initial critical responses to Frankie, White points out that discussions of her gender remained conspicuously absent—as though critics were unable to imagine that initiation into the role of woman could be a problem (91). As I have already mentioned, I think this also had something to do with the perception of McCullers as a writer: she had already established herself as one who deals with “universal” themes; she was not known as a writer of girls’ fiction. White points to Fiedler as the critic who introduces gender into readings of Frankie (though the term gender is anachronistic here when applied to Fiedler: he uses “sex” to describe the problem to which Frankie is introduced), but it is actually Simone de Beauvoir who first adds gender (though sex is probably the more accurate word) into the critical mix.⁴⁰ Moreover, what is interesting about de Beauvoir’s reading of Frankie is that it treats a moment of the text that other readers seem to forget. So intent are they on deciding where Frankie is trying to go, they forget from where she starts.

De Beauvoir cites a long passage from *The Member of the Wedding* where the novel tries to explain why Frankie is so troubled before the wedding couple ever appears. For the purposes of textual analysis, I will quote the passage from the original English but with de Beauvoir’s ellipses, as they appear in *Le Deuxième sexe*. Not only will this serve to introduce us to Frankie and her crisis but to analyze what de Beauvoir elides:

This was the summer when Frankie was sick and tired of being Frankie. She hated herself, and had become a loafer a big no-good who hung around the summer kitchen: dirty and

⁴⁰ In her book *What Is a Woman?* (1999), Toril Moi charts the entry and use of “gender” in the English language. She argues that the current trend to read “gender” where de Beauvoir writes “sex” is to read the text from a conceptual framework that obscures what is at stake in de Beauvoir’s critique. See pages 21-83.

greedy and mean and sad. Besides being too mean to live, she was a criminal. [...] Then the spring of that year had been a long queer season. Things began to change and Frankie did not understand this change. [...] There was something about the green trees and the flowers of April that made Frankie sad. She did not know why she was sad, but because of this peculiar sadness, she began to realize that she ought to leave the town. [...] So she knew she ought to leave the town and go to some place far away. For the late spring, that year, was lazy and too sweet. The long afternoons flowered and lasted and the green sweetness sickened her. [...] [M]any things made Frankie suddenly wish to cry. Very early in the morning she would sometimes go out into the yard and stand for a long time looking at the sunrise sky. And it was as though a question came into her heart, and the sky did not answer. Things she had never noticed much before began to hurt her: home lights watched from the evening sidewalks, an unknown voice from an alley. She would stare at the lights and listen to the voice, and something inside her stiffened and waited. But the lights would darken, the voice fall silent, and though she waited, that was all. She was afraid of those things that made her suddenly wonder who she was, and what she was going to be in the world, and why she was standing at that minute, seeing a light, or listening, or staring up into the sky: alone. She was afraid, and there was a queer tightness in her chest. [...] She went around town, and the things she saw and heard seemed to be left somehow unfinished, and there was the tightness in her that would not break. She would hurry to do something, but what she did was always wrong. [...] [A]fter the long twilights of this season, when Frankie had walked around the sidewalks of the town, a jazz sadness quivered her nerves and her heart stiffened and almost stopped. (McCullers 23-25, de

Beauvoir 2:61-62)⁴¹

De Beauvoir reads this passage as representing the effects of a particular period, the period when “le corps enfantin devient un corps de femme et se fait chair” (62). “Femme” here, of course, has to be understood in a non-biological sense. For de Beauvoir, though she does not deny the specificity of the female body, woman (*la femme*) is not a naturally occurring being; she calls it instead a “vocation” taught to and imposed on the girl from the beginning: “Dès ses premières années,” she argues, “sa vocation [of being a “woman”] lui est impérieusement insufflée” (14). Therefore, the girl’s bodily changes occur with the trace of having passed through “la médiation d’autrui” (13). This being the case, these changes cannot be experienced as meaningless, without consequent. Stamped with the demands of the other that she be “woman,” her body literally makes flesh this being the other has sited on it. De Beauvoir argues that this is a difficult moment for the girl because there is a fear inhabiting her, even if she cannot express it as such: she fears not being herself or unsure of the self she will be once the metamorphosis is done.⁴² This bodily change then precipitates the self into a liminal space because “elle se rend compte que, dans ses rapports avec le monde et avec son propre corps, quelque chose est en train de changer subtilement” (60). De Beauvoir inscribes Frankie’s crisis in this problematic of becoming a new being given by the other.

The novel does indeed describe Frankie as having undergone physical changes and existing in a liminal space. The novel’s opening lines depict her thus: “This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of

⁴¹ I am quoting from a recent paperback edition. The quotation appears in the second volume in the first chapter entitled “Enfance.”

⁴² As proof for this observation, de Beauvoir offers the following information: “Les métamorphoses de la chenille qui se fait chrysalide et papillon mettent au cœur un malaise: est-ce encore le même chenille après ce long sommeil? Sous ces ailes brillantes, se reconnaît-elle? J’ai connu des fillettes que la vue d’une chrysalide plongeait dans un rêve effaré” (60).

nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung in doorways, and she was afraid” (3). We soon learn that she has grown four inches in the last year and this has caused changes “dans ses rapports avec le monde.” “Already,” writes McCullers, “the hateful little summer children hollered to her: ‘Is it cold up there?’ And the comments of grown people make Frankie shrivel on her heels” (19). Close to her widowed father, she had slept in the same bed as he until “[o]ne night in April, when she and her father were going to bed, he looked at her and said, all of a sudden: ‘Who is this great big long-legged twelve-year-old blunderbuss who still wants to sleep with her old Papa.’ And she was too big to sleep with her father any more. She had to sleep in her upstairs room alone” (24).⁴³ While these changes do affect Frankie, they take on a particular resonance due to another change. In the passage that de Beauvoir cites, the text situates elsewhere the cause of Frankie’s fear and her state of being “unjoined”—only de Beauvoir does not remark it.

The passage begins in the summer, the diegetic time from which this passage regresses to return to April, but De Beauvoir’s first ellipsis mutes the analepsis marked in the text where McCullers writes: “Yet Frankie had not always been a criminal and a big no-good. Until the April of that year, and all the years of her life before, she had been like other people” (22)⁴⁴ The text here zeroes in on April as the decisive period in Frankie’s story. There is before April and after April. De Beauvoir’s second ellipsis cancels out the puncturing like quality of April in

⁴³ This occurs after the “something” in April that I will shortly discuss.

⁴⁴ The full elision reads:

If the Law knew about her, she could be tried in the courthouse and locked up in the jail. Yet Frankie had not always been a criminal and a big no-good. Until the April of that year, and all the years of her life before, she had been like other people. She belonged to a club and was in the seventh grade at school. She worked for her father on Saturday morning and went to the show every Saturday afternoon. She was not the kind of person ever to think of being afraid. At night she slept in the bed with her father, but not because she was scared of the dark.

Frankie's experience of time. McCullers writes:

After the plain gray winter the March winds banged on the windowpanes, and clouds were shirred and white on the blue sky. April that year came sudden and still, and the green of the trees was a wild bright green. The pale wistarias bloomed all over town, and silently the blossoms shattered. There was something about the green trees and the flowers of April that made Frankie sad. She did not know why she was sad, but because of this peculiar sadness, she began to realize she ought to leave the town. (22)

Whereas de Beauvoir's reading wants to place Frankie's experience in the durative time of subtle changes, the text qualifies the experience that has untethered Frankie as punctual. What then happened so suddenly in April? Quite simply "something." Frankie herself does not know; all she knows are its consequences: a peculiar sadness and the need to leave town. Against de Beauvoir's subsumption of physical development into her logic of becoming for the other, the novel points to a critical moment that Frankie cannot inscribe in either the experience of her bodily changes or her relation to others. In some way, there are no symbolic parameters for what has happened to her.

I would argue, in fact, that it is only in looking at Frankie's "something" from the point of view of the phallus—that is, within a framework that reduces the possible to questions of sex (in both its normative and queer forms)—that one reads Frankie's crisis as having anything to do with becoming "woman" either physically or socially. The text is simply opaque about what has occurred. Of course, a certain hermeneutic would remind us of the long history of the symbolism that associates budding flowers and budding girls, of the equation in literature of flowers to the female sex, of spring as the springing forth of sexual desire. It seems that de Beauvoir herself has unconsciously assumed this symbolism. But insofar as the text plays on this association, it does

so to deliberately show how inadequate such symbolism is where Frankie is concerned. The wisterias disappear quickly, are pale and silent. The trees and flowers of April are not themselves what affects her, but it is rather “something about” them. Frankie seems half aware of the symbolic content of spring, but this awareness also reveals the groundless nature of this content in Frankie’s experience. That is, the sexual symbolism of spring time flowers and trees does not speak to her initiation into womanhood or even sexual desire—they serve no representational purpose; in fact, they fail to represent, for all they give Frankie is “something.”

Here I would add that I am not arguing that the usual symbolism fails to speak to Frankie’s sexual desire, as certain lesbian or queer readings would have it, which only reinscribes Frankie into the logic of the phallus; I am arguing that Frankie fails to be interpolated by sexual desire as such. It is not that she fails to read her desire in the trees and the flowers; it is that she reads this desire and finds it somehow lacking: in the signifying hothouse of spring, Frankie discerns an unnamable “something.” That this something has little to do with sexual desire can be seen in the effects it produces: it interjects itself into the whole world, making it somehow not whole. Suddenly, the sky (the spiritual) and lived rooms and intimate conversation (private life) and the town (social life) fall silent and are lacking (“somehow unfinished” (McCullers 25)). They fail to respond to the “as though” question that Frankie’s waiting suggests; they are the answer to a question that she has not asked.

I read here that McCullers stages the girl’s problematic as having to deal with an experience of a representational lack, a lack in the symbolic order. This lack does not give onto a nothing, but a something, an excess. Frankie experiences this symbolic inadequacy as a problem in the world, for whereas the world was circumscribed and ordered, it no longer appears to have a point. Frankie wanders in a world bleakly devoid of sense, where words no longer have their

usual efficacy and where she no longer has a place. Theoretically, what makes McCullers's text interesting is that the event that precipitates this crisis in meaning is left stubbornly nameless: "There was something about the green trees and flowers..." Thus, when recent critics tend to read Frankie as desiring something that has been foreclosed from the social (lesbian sexuality or queer relationality), they fail to ponder how Frankie figures a subject who exposes the insufficiency of the social, where desire can take on sense, where it can have representation. By leaving Frankie's "something" contentless, the text works to signal an experience that is not foreclosed by social norms but that language itself fails to speak.

The text is, however, explicit about the effects of this sudden break in April. From then, her life departs in another trajectory, as though she lives according to another logic, one that she herself does not understand. She has entered what I am calling the logic of the event. Frankie is subjectivized by this something in the April trees; it is the event that makes her a feminine subject. Like the faithful subject in Badiou's *L'Éthique* who decides to "se rapporter désormais à la situation *du point de vue du supplément événementiel* (68-9 italics Badiou's), we will see that Frankie faithfully grapples with the lack in language that has unanchored her from belonging. Through the solution she invents, we will see how this lack has feminized her.

Frankie and the Trace of the Event

Recalling that Badiou conceives of the truth procedure as the trace of the event in the situation, we can see how Frankie's actions take on the logic of a process whereby the event is carried forth into the rest of her story, determining her actions. After her subjectivization by the event, figured by the "peculiar sadness" and the feeling that "she ought to leave town," she contemplates the world in order to discover where she might go, but she encounters another problem:

[...] she began to realize she ought to leave town. She read the war news and thought about the world and packed her suitcase to go away; but she did not know where she should go.

It was the year when Frankie thought about the world. And she did not see it as a round school globe, with the countries neat and different-colored. She thought of the world as huge and cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour. (23)

She does not know where she can go because the world itself has in some sense ceased to exist. While it was once a field of completeness where everything had its place (including herself), it is now broken into disparate parts. Whatever functioned to hold it together has stopped functioning. On one level, Frankie is simply responding to the effects of the war. It would seem the war itself is the problem with the world, but the text troubles this interpretation. On the one hand, the war contributes to Frankie's experience of the world as cracked simply because the medium of the newspaper gives it to her that way: "Frankie read the war news in the paper, but there were so many foreign places, and the war was happening so fast, and sometimes she did not understand. [...] Sometimes these pictures of the war, the world, whirled in her mind and she was dizzy" (23). The war suddenly brings the world to Frankie in the form of newspaper articles and pictures about far off places that before had only been seen as "neat and different-colored" on the "round school globe." On the other hand, after April, the war news serves to highlight a more serious problem: "the world seemed somehow separate from herself" (24).

At the same time, Frankie dreams of joining the war, but since this is not a possibility she decides on another means of participation:

She decided to donate blood to the Red Cross; she wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the

whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of those people. [...] And she could picture ahead, in the years after the war, meeting the soldiers who had her blood, and they would say that they owed their life to her; and they would not call her Frankie—they would call her Addams. [...] To think about the world for very long made her afraid. She was not afraid of Germans or bombs or Japanese. She was afraid because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself.

(23)

McCullers calls attention to the desire animating Frankie's decision to participate in the war (by whatever means): it is not to save the world but to enter into a relation with it. While a world war disrupts the stability of the world, it also reconstitutes the world within another arena, one where Australia, France, and China despite their positions on the globe are suddenly allied. That is, the war also weds countries together. This ability to ally seems to be what interests Frankie in the war: through it, she herself can become "close kin" to non-kin, she can lose the particularity of "Frankie" and become one of the group by being renamed (Addams) in its conventions. A reading through the lens of gender would perhaps see the erasure of femininity as what is at stake in this renaming, i.e., that Frankie seeks to lose her particularity as woman or to blur gender lines, but I would suspend that judgment until we see how Frankie will further respond to the event once she realizes that the war is not a real possibility for her.

First she responds by a bout of nonsense. Unable to find an outlet for the fear and anxiety that has seized her, "she would hurry to do something"; McCullers elaborates:

She would go home and put the coal scuttle on her head, like a crazy person's hat, and walk around the kitchen table. She would do anything that suddenly occurred to her—but whatever she did was always wrong, and not at all what she had wanted. Then, having

done these wrong and silly things, she would stand, sickened and empty, in the kitchen door and say:

“I just wish I could tear down this whole town.” (25)

While acknowledging the recognizable teenage angst depicted here, I would also read here the real vulnerability and suffering that the subject exposed to the excess produced by the lack in language undergoes. That is, experiencing the inadequacy of meaning is not in and of itself liberating; it can be debilitating. At the same time, Frankie’s do-something-anything strategy in response to this excess speaks to an ethic of not giving into its mortifying effects. One sees here a real attempt to secure a form for her experience, but because she is on her own in this endeavor, it seems inevitable that nonsense results.

As nonsense fails her, she next turns to crime, as though the problem were with the law itself. If she could just slip onto the other side of it, then she would find a space where she could resolve her troubles. She steals her father’s pistol, carries it around town, and shoots it off in “a vacant lot” (25). She steals from Sears, and then “[o]ne Saturday afternoon she committed a secret and unknown sin”: “In the MacKeans’ garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin, ad how bad it was she did not know. The sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach, and she dreaded the eyes of everyone” (26). In these illicit enjoyments, Frankie in essence interrogates the effectiveness of the law in dealing with the excess to which she is subject. Can it truly provide a means of containment? Do the enjoyments it forbids really assuage this excess? Put another way, if there is nothing, no law holding the world together, can we procure happiness from doing whatever we want? Frankie’s experience tells her no. In other words, Frankie interrogates probably the predominant phallic fantasy: that one is unhappy, unfulfilled, lacking in enjoyment because some authoritative Other has forbidden the object, the

action, the circumstance that would make enjoyment possible; if only once could have access to the forbidden, then all would be well.

Bereft then of a way to respond to her experience, Frankie retreats, she stays home where “[e]ach day was like the day before, except that it was longer, and nothing hurt any more” until the day that her brother brings home his fiancée (26). The sight of the couple troubles her anew: “She stood in the doorway, coming from the hall, and the first sight of her brother and the bride had shocked her heart. Together they made in her this feeling she could not name. But it was like the feelings of spring, only more sudden and more sharp” (27). The sight of the couple returns Frankie to her springtime experience. From here, the novel focuses on one of the responses that Frankie devises to resolve the crisis that April precipitates. As the title suggests, being the member of the wedding is the solution that the novel stages.⁴⁵ In other words, Frankie is to have the traditional fate of all girls in literature. By so doing, the novel specifically evokes the literary convention of the marriage plot. It does so, however, to rewrite its functioning for the girl.

The We of Me: *The Wedding and Feminine Fantasy*

In the traditional female *Bildungsroman*, marriage functions as the sign that the girl has successfully completed her *Bildungs*. It signals an overcoming of personal foibles and/or external adversity and integration into the social. It is the boy’s equivalent of arriving at his proper social position through securing his economic future. At the same time, marriage proposes a sexual union whereby the girl can accede to the position of woman, not simply in the social sense but in the symbolic sense by instating a relation to her sexual other. In this sense, marriage is performative: it produces and serves to guarantee a (sexual) relation that is posited retroactively as structuring the social space all along. Here it is helpful to evoke Jacques Lacan’s (in)famous

⁴⁵ The use of the definite article in the title suggests both a specific but undesignated member and the member of the wedding *par excellence*: the bride.

statement that “there is no sexual relation.” Unlike more prominent theories of sexuality, which would see gender differences as the effect of social practices, psychoanalysis argues that they emerge to respond to a non-social problem. As we saw in the introduction, Lacan posits that “[l]’impasse sexuelle secrète les fictions qui rationalisent l’impossible dont elle provient. Je ne les dis pas imaginées, j’y lis comme Freud l’invitation au réel qui en répond” (*Television* 51). Lacan identifies the sexual impasse as the site where we see the effect of language on the human being: it cuts her off from the natural functioning of the organism and introduces her both to an objectless drive energy and into the inadequacy of language, which can only attempt to re-find the lacking object. Social configurations of sexual relations are a response to this effect; they must of necessity fail, which produces myths that try to explain this failure. Commenting on the discontent that the Oedipal family arrangement breeds, Lacan remarks, “Même si les souvenirs de la répression familiale n’étaient pas vrai, il faudrait les inventer, et on n’y manque pas. Le mythe, c’est ça, la tentative de donner forme épique à ce qui s’opère de la structure” (51). In other words, a culture’s myths are an attempt to explain and ground in meaning an originary and impossible to speak lack. The various cultural practices and narratives produced to overcome this lack—marriage, soul mates, free love, amour fou, friends with benefits, hooking up, cruising, or indeed theories that want to move beyond “sex”—are all failed attempts to establish a relation to an object that does not exist.⁴⁶ To say that there is no sexual relation is to say that there is no guaranteed teleology for speaking subjects. With this in mind, one can see why perhaps culturally it has been so important to establish the marriage plot as essential to the *Bildungsroman*. Beyond establishing or maintaining any economic, political, or social configuration, marriage also maintains the illusion that there can be a sexual relation, that a

⁴⁶ See Lacan’s reading in his seminar on *The Transference* of Aristophanes’s myth recounted in Plato’s *Symposium*.

teleology for the drives exists. Thus, even though traditional marriage upholds and institutionalizes gender norms, working to maintain the differences between the sexes, it is more important to note that its function is precisely to do so in order to establish a relation between the subject and its object.⁴⁷ In relation to the girl, the traditional marriage plot fused accession to a social (and economic) position with a sexual position. That is, marriage functioned to make “woman” a social project whereby “woman” appeared in the social and appeared to have a socially guaranteed relation to her sexual other/object.

In this sense, McCullers’s positioning of a wedding as a girl’s personal project suggests that the assumption of a feminine position is at play. What is of interest is that this feminine position is not tied to a reiteration of the feminine status quo: one half of the heterosexual married couple. In her extremely insightful reading of the use that Frankie makes of the wedding, Elizabeth Freeman observes:

Frankie [...] explores and inhabits the mode the wedding dramatizes in order to make other more seemingly phantasmatic affiliations legible within it. The novel’s queerness lies in its perverse use of the wedding as an opportunity to redescribe how intimacy, connection, or “membership” might be formalized and displayed. Finally, in its redescription of desire itself as the desire to join—and in joining, transform—a mode public, collective identification, *Member* departs from the terrain of both the object- focused “lesbian” and

⁴⁷ It also seems important to note that, from a psychoanalytic point of view, this means that marriage is just one of any number of social practices that serve this function. Marriage’s efficacy in maintaining its proposed solution has recently made a comeback, but on the whole it is waning. However, this does not mean that any new practice will ultimately serve any better even if at first it may appear so. A twenty-first century career woman in a companionate relationship is no “closer” to her partner than a Victorian housewife was to her husband. Nor does psychoanalysis allow one to entertain the notion that there is a normative or non-normative sexuality: any sexual practice is the symptom of a singular subject’s fantasy which he constructs in response to the traumatic loss of object. I thank Daniel Wilson for this insight.

less-gender-specific “queer,” using the over-feminized form of the wedding to produce what might be called a female-inflected queer rearrangement of social life in the 1940s and beyond. (52)

As Freeman points out, Frankie puts the wedding to a radically new use: to resignify or to signify otherwise the possibilities of belonging and desire within the social field. Freeman also indicates that Frankie cannot be easily assimilated into certain lesbian or queer frameworks because she does not participate in the object-logic of lesbianism nor is she invested in queering gender. Freeman goes so far as to suggest that there is indeed something of the feminine that sticks at least to the surface of the particulars of Frankie’s story. At the same time, Freeman insists that queer is the appropriate word for what Frankie does with the wedding. To the extent that “queer” would signal non-normative or a falling outside of the status quo, I agree with Freeman’s designation, but I wonder why Frankie’s story is characterized as giving us insight simply into a “female-inflected queer” practice but not femininity itself. Why doesn’t Frankie allow us to look at femininity anew? That is, what is gained by moving “beyond” or “outside” femininity instead of seeing Frankie as a new entry into femininity and what might be at stake within its logic? Ostensibly, what is gained is a destabilization of normative heterosexuality in the hope of producing and recognizing other/new modes of enjoyment and relation. To (re)inscribe Frankie within femininity would seem reactionary, would reinstate a compulsory heterosexuality, which has been found to be so wanting. Perhaps. But perhaps it is more destabilizing of compulsory heterosexuality to trouble its terms from within. Why “queer” Frankie and her like when it allows those who do not identify as queer to dismiss stories like Frankie’s as having nothing to say about what it might or might not mean to be a woman or a man? To set up a conceptual field where queerness is positioned in relation to (if not outside of) the norm allows the fantasy to

persist that 1) there is a norm and 2) the limits and failures of the norm can be escaped. For those who identify with the fantasy of the norm, the recognition of “other” modes of enjoyment and relation *qua* other does nothing to expose “normal” people to their own fantasy. Conversely, those who might see queer as an identity or practice that escapes the failures and limits of the norm might not think how they reproduce those limits and failures under other modes. Indeed, some might see a queer identity or queer practices as a solution to the failures that the norm stages. Freeman herself appears to see such a move operating in Frankie’s story: Frankie would resignify what weddings could do so that it allows for relations that a social sphere structured by the traditional marriage imperative had heretofore foreclosed, i.e., the traditional wedding limits other types of relationality. Yes, but this assumes that the traditional wedding primarily functions to foreclose other types of relation when, I would argue, it primarily serves to foreclose non-relation itself: it socially inscribes the promise of a relation that (symbolically) makes a One where there was not One. This is the critical insight that Frankie’s use of marriage indicates. She falls in love with the fantasy of relationality itself, not to any specific object that would be designated in any one person’s fantasy of relation. Or we might say that Frankie falls in love with fantasy *tout court*, if fantasy is always that structured field by which the object may appear. In Lacanian notation, the fantasy’s operation is represented by the diamond lozenge \square in the sentence $\$ \square a$, where $\$$ is the subject split by language and a is the object lost in that split. Through the lens of the fantasy, a relation to the lost object can be imagined by which the subject feels that she has being. For the moment let us just note that Frankie seems unconcerned by any object that appears through the fantasy; rather, she is ecstatic that there is a mechanism for establishing a relation between people. She falls in love with the wedding:

Frankie got a crush!

Frankie got a crush!

Frankie got a crush!

On the *Wedd-ing!* (35)

So informs the shrewd Berenice.

By looking through the singular creation that Frankie produces (falling in love with a ceremony), I want to argue that we can see something of the feminine. Frankie's failure to reproduce the feminine status quo does not move her beyond sexual difference, nor would I argue that it resignifies femininity. It instead reveals what is at stake for the feminine subject in her relation to the Other, a relation that the phallic status quo works to occlude.

In an essay entitled "Loneliness...An American Malady," Carson McCullers herself provides a reading of Frankie's "queer" practice:

Consciousness of self is the first abstract problem that the human being solves. Indeed, it is this self-consciousness that removes us from lower animals. This primitive grasp of identity develops with constantly shifting emphasis through all our years. Perhaps maturity is simply the history of those mutations that reveal to the individual the relations between himself and the world in which he finds himself.

After the first establishment of identity there comes the imperative need to lose this new-found sense of separateness and to belong to something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self...

In *The Member of the Wedding* the lonely 12-year old girl, Frankie Addams, articulates this universal need: 'The trouble with me is that for a long time I have just been an *I* person. All people belong to a *We* except me. Not to belong to a *We* makes you too lonesome.' (qtd. in Cook 62)

McCullers here codes Frankie's crisis as a universal one, and I read the problematic that she elaborates here as an articulation of the lack inherent to becoming human: cut off from "the lower animals" by the signifier, we are introduced into a lack that we seek to overcome. Her invocation of Frankie as the instantiation of the universal, however, provokes a question: is Frankie's solution to this lack a universal one? On this note, McCullers' formulation is striking in its fascist logic: "the self's need to belong to something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self."⁴⁸ When she wrote this essay in 1949, she could not have been unaware of the characteristics of the fascist parties in power in Europe. Indeed, it may be she wrote with fascism in mind—her reason attempting to make sense of what in the human being gives rise to such occurrences. But her staging of belonging via Frankie shows none of the homogenizing of identity that characterizes fascism—with its attendant aggression towards an other who is always seen as threatening to the coherent identity of the group—for once Frankie decides that she belongs to the wedding and its couple becomes her "we of me" (42), her relation to the world changes, no longer is she cut adrift: now she can connect. The morning after she has decided that she will be a member of the wedding, she decides to take a walk through the town. McCullers describes her experience thus:

Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine [as Frankie has renamed herself⁴⁹] felt connected with all that she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around town. [...] she had no sooner walked down the left side of the main street and up again on the right sidewalk, when she realized a further happening. It had to do with various people,

⁴⁸ It should be recalled that fascist is derived from the Latin *fascis* (which also gives us the French *faisceau*), bundle. By joining the fascist political party, one loses the weakness of the individual by subsuming oneself into the strength of the group (the bundle).

⁴⁹ She renames herself F. Jasmine in order to have a name that begins with the same letter as the names of the couple: Jarvis and Janice. Through the letter, she feels that she can literalize her belonging to them.

some known to her and others strangers, she met and passed along the street. An old colored man, stiff and proud on his rattling wagon seat, drove a sad blindered mule down toward the Saturday market. F. Jasmine looked at him, he looked at her, and to the outward appearance that was all. But in that glance, F. Jasmine felt between his eyes and her own eyes a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other [...] Now the same thing happened again and again on those four blocks [...] it was there, this feeling—a connection close as answers to calls. (54-5)

Frankie's belonging to the "we" of the couple does not seem to close her off to the world or to solidify her sense of self by contradistinction to others. In contrast to a fascist logic, her "we" does not instate a threatening remainder located in an other outside the group. Instead, her belonging allows a self who is open to an encounter with others outside the "we." In this "connection close as answers to calls," Frankie finally appears to have found the answer to the question (and thus the question itself) she was asking in her searching of the sky. More interestingly, she appears to take up the position of the other who asks to be welcomed, for she spends the morning seeking out others, telling them of her plans to become a member of the wedding—in so doing, she satisfies "the need to be recognized for her true self" (64).

The last formulation is telling. Why does she need to be recognized for her true self? And who does she need to recognize it? By placing Frankie's problematic within the discourse of recognition and selfhood, the novel makes clear that the crisis precipitated by the event in April has divested the girl of her sense of self. In so doing, the novel explicitly connects the experience of the lack in language to a loss of self. The loss of the world's/language's wholeness imperils the girl's self. Thus, in order to be her self, the world has to be repaired: she needs the whole world in to be recognized for her true self. From the preceding passage, we see that the wedding

produces a field, a fantasmatic space where Frankie can imagine connection to the whole world exactly because it reconstitutes the world as a whole: “Today she did not see the world as loose and cracked and turning a thousand miles an hour, so that the spinning views of war and distant lands made her mind dizzy. The world had never been so close to her” (71). Why should a whole world be “the object” that appears through the fantasmatic lens of the wedding?

In her reading of the *The Member of the Wedding*, Freeman argues that the novel “from its title onward, uses the wedding to elaborate the desire for, and indeed to create, a world in which object choice is not constitutive or determinative of sexual subjectivity” (50). This does seem indeed to be the case for Frankie in her use of the wedding: the wedding does not through its capacity to institute relation bring into view an object of desire but instead a field of recognition. I read this not so much as queer but as a mark of femininity. When Lacan says that woman has her own way of making up for the absence of the sexual relation, he distinguishes her way from the masculine which is structured by a search for the object. The formula $\$ \square a$ is primarily a phallic one. To say that woman is not-all phallic suggests that the formula for the fantasy is not-all there is where woman is concerned. In her explanation of how woman makes up for the “nonrelation between the sexes,” McNulty writes, “woman is involved in the quest for an imaginary Other whose love would give her what she seeks on the level of the signifier [...] an Other in whose gaze the subject would come into being as a unified ego” (“Feminine Love” 206). In other words, the feminine fantasy is structured by a search for an Other who would see her (true?) self.

What is so critically insightful in Frankie’s use of the wedding is that it does not constitute a relation to an Other who sees her as some *woman* (that is, a gendered identity or a symbolic feminine position) but as *someone*. That is, Frankie’s use of the wedding shows us how the

feminine quest can take on a modality outside the discourse of gender and sexuality. As *someone*, she can be counted, she can become a member “of the whole world,” (108) as she expresses her hopes for what the wedding will accomplish. McCullers’s tale distills the stakes of the wedding in the feminine strategy for overcoming the lack that language introduces: it establishes a relation to an Other who anchors the self, neutralizing the excess caused by the lack in language. Even if the feminine subject moves outside the traditional heterosexual paradigm, she reproduces the same search under other modes. While these other modes open up new possibilities for what might constitute an imaginary Other (the Other does not have to be a man or a sexual partner, for example), the novel ultimately suggests that the relationality that the wedding procures is impossible. Frankie does not belong to the couple it institutes. At the wedding, they fail to notice her, and Frankie herself seems unable to speak. After the wedding, they leave without her, pushing Frankie to a breakdown:

when she watched the car with the two of them driving away from her, and flinging herself down in the sizzling dust, she cried out for the last time: “Take me! Take me!”—from the beginning to the end the wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare. By mid-afternoon it was all finished and the return bus left at four o’clock. (144)

Frankie’s initial reaction is telling. McCullers, renaming her Frances, writes: “Frances wanted the whole world to die” (144). The fantasy of relation/connection exposed as fantasy, Frankie desires the end of the Other that the wedding made possible.

Her second reaction is to run away, but she is brought back by her father. At which point, Frankie realizes that “[t]he world was too far away, and there was no way any more that she could be included. She was back to the fear of the summertime, the old feelings that the world was separate from herself—and the failed wedding had quickened the fear to terror” (157).

Ultimately, the novel suggests, “weddings” fail the feminine subject; they do not solve the fundamental absence of relation that language causes. The only relation they can produce is a false one. Thus, I read *The Member of the Wedding* as a critique of the marriage plot and indeed as a critique of marriage itself. Does the falling away of marriage as a solution, however, suggest that Frankie has moved beyond the logic of hysteria to accede to a position from which she can find a signifier for the barred Other? How will she respond to the terror to which she is now exposed?

The novel ends a year later when Frankie has befriended a girl named Mary Littlejohn.⁵⁰ Frankie appears to no longer be terrorized by the failure of the wedding. Her relation with Mary seems to have secured her the belonging she has craved since that destabilizing moment in April. Critics who read the novel as a lesbian coming of age tale point to this ending as figuring a solution to Frankie’s troubles. But the novel suggests that things are not so simple, for with Mary, Frankie in fact repeats an impossible desire—and not because a lesbian relationship was foreclosed in Frankie’s social space. Rather, the text suggests that something more than Mary is at stake in Frankie’s relationship with her. McCullers’s describes Frankie’s desires:

They read poets like Tennyson together; and Mary was going to be a great painter and Frances a great poet—or else the foremost authority on radar. Mr. Littlejohn had been connected with a tractor company and before the war the Littlejohns had lived abroad. When Frances was sixteen and Mary eighteen, they were going around the world together. Frances placed the sandwiches on a plate, along with eight chocolates and some salted nuts; this was to be a midnight feast, to be eaten in the bed at twelve o’clock.

⁵⁰ The name is suggestive of two things: her cousin, John Henry, to whom she was particularly close and who has died; and a masculine other. Neither her lost cousin nor a boy, Mary occupies their place diminutively. Perhaps it is only because she can occupy diminutively this place of the other that she is chosen.

“I told you we’re going to travel around the world together.”

“Mary Littlejohn,” said Berenice, in a tinged voice. “Mary Littlejohn.” (159)

While at first Frankie’s desire vis-à-vis Mary is to establish a harmonious pairing of painter and poet (establishing belonging through aesthetic endeavor), this harmony is undermined by that separating dash on the other side of which Frankie establishes a relation to the radar. As a mechanism for discovering entities within one’s range, the radar is suggestive of a desire to establish relation with much more than a single human being; indeed, there is nothing inherently sexual about the relation that the radar makes possible for in essence what the radar does is to create a space (a world) where the proximity of entities to each other can appear. In other words, the radar functions much as the wedding, as a fantasy space of relationality. On the other side of the radar appears Mr. Littlejohn who was *connected* to a tractor company through which he provided his family a connection to the world. It is only once this connection to the world abroad has been established does the text then move to the bedroom, where Frankie and Mary will share a midnight snack in bed. While this is suggestive of a sexual relation, Frankie immediately jumps from the bed to the world; she and Mary will travel the world together. Berenice’s intoning of Mary’s name both misses the mark of Frankie’s statement and highlights Mary’s metonymic function. Mary functions as the wedding did; Berenice could have equally intoned “the wedding, the wedding.” So while the book hints at the possibility of sex in Frankie and Mary’s friendship, it also suggests that this partner has a non-sexual purpose for Frankie: through it, she is seeking the world. Frankie is repeating her experience with the wedding.

Though the end of the novel suggests that Frankie has left behind the queerness of the preceding summer, her current state has to be understood as a determined by the event in April that unanchored her from the social order. Though her friendship with Mary Littlejohn appears

as a solution that erases or cancels out the loss of a harmonious world and a harmonious self, we should remember that McCullers herself understands Frankie's story as an attempt to lose a separateness that is constitutive of our state of being human. This separateness cannot be overcome; it can only be forgotten for a while in entering into a relation with "something larger [...] than the weak, lonely self." Hence we should not read the queer summer as an interlude between two harmonious states, a period of transition on the other side of which an equilibrium is refound. She is to be sure transformed at the end of the novel, tempered by the shattering failure of the wedding, whence her new name, Frances, for the short last section of the novel. No longer childishly naïve about the possibilities available to her in her social sphere, Frankie becomes the more grown-up Frances. But Frances carries the mark of the event, a trace of the loss it incurred; she is still subject to its effects. If Frances loves Mary for the world that appears through her and for the promise of traveling that world, then it is because Frankie, saddened by something in the April trees, knew "she ought to leave town" (22).

The Member of the Wedding leaves open to question then the success of Frankie's latest undertaking. When she realizes that she and Mary will not travel the world together three years later, will Mary too become a failed endeavor to assuage the fear wrought in April? McCullers ultimately provides us with no simple answers to solve the problem of the lack at the heart of human existence. This is, I think, part of the genius of her work. She does, however, represent our attempts to assuage it as life's defining project and thus tells us that without the loss that inaugurates this project, life can take on no meaning. Though I read Frankie as a feminine subject and thus her solutions as determined by the logic of femininity, I think that Frankie does remind us that each subject has a singular response to the lack that affects us all. In this, she also reminds us that the human is boundlessly imaginative.

CHAPTER 2

ANTES: HOW BODIES COME UNDONE

Published in 1989 and winner of the prestigious Premio Xavier Villaurrutia, *Antes* is Carmen Boullosa's second novel. Many of its themes—girlhood, family life, absent mothers—are picked up from her first novel, *Mejor desaparece* (1987) and continued in a third, *Treinta años* (1999).⁵¹ (The three novels are considered her girlhood cycle.) In this second handling, Boullosa's narrator and protagonist most resembles the author. Born in 1954 in Mexico City to prosperous families in Mexico's growing middle class, both have a mother named Esther, who leads successful a career and who dies when they are still children. Both attend Ursuline schools and thus receive a strong religious education. But whereas Boullosa has only full siblings, the protagonist, who remains nameless throughout the novel, has two older half-sisters from her father's previous marriage. His first wife has disappeared for reasons the girl can never explain. Her father is particularly beloved as a good playmate; her mother, an artist, is resented for spending too much time in her studio and not with the girl. The girl's maternal grandmother, also named Esther, is appreciated more because she is more attentive.

These are the principal characters in a narrative that is difficult to explain. It is less a traditional narrative with a recognizable plot than a collection of episodes that begins with the narrator's birth and ends with her death. The narrator herself explains the framework of her narrative thus: "He procurado omitir en mi narración todas las anécdotas que no me condujeron

⁵¹ Like much of Boullosa's work, *Mejor desaparece* has not yet been translated into English. A translated extract of the novel entitled *Then Disappear*, however, can be found in *The Reading Room Issue 7* (2007). Her best known novel translated into English is *They're Cows, We're Pigs* (*Son Vacas, Somos Puercos* (1991)) about a male-only colony of pirates on the island of Tortuga (off the coast of present day Haiti). Other novels translated into English are *Leaving Tabasco* (*Treinta años* (1999)) and *Cleopatra Dismounts* (*De un salto descabalgó la reina* (2002)).

aquí directamente. [...] Si omití muchos años y muchos hechos, también borré de mis palabras muchas personas con las que hice mundo, mencionando sólo las que ayudaron (todas, si, sin quererlo) a traerme aquí” (132). “Aquí” being something like the land of the dead for we learn (only) at the end of novel that the narrator has died. In an interview, Boullosa calls it “hell,” a world peopled with ghosts “peleando por encontrar un cuerpo para venir con nosotros, eso es el infierno, la gente que no tiene cuerpo y no puede entrar al mundo con los demás” (Ibsen 61). We will return to this question of the protagonist’s search for a body. What, then, are the events that have led her to hell in search of a means to return amongst us? They are, on the one hand, entirely banal: the first years of school in which the narrator describes “the salute to the flag with words that are incomprehensible and meaningless, the awarding of prizes for achievement, the pranks of the older girls, the written warnings sent home, the inevitable visit to the principal’s office for some infraction of discipline, the cruelty of the children to one another” (de Beer 163). Other banalities include playing with her father and sisters, shopping for school clothes and supplies with her grandmother, spending vacation in a hotel, visiting a friend’s house for a swimming party, experiencing her first kiss, attending a concert at Bellas Artes (Mexico City’s major opera house), getting her first period. On the other hand, all these episodes are tainted with a menacing supernatural element. Nevertheless, Boullosa’s text does not read as magical realism; it rather calls to mind Edgar Alan Poe’s unsettling stories. Boullosa herself was drawing on the Gothic genre in late 18th and early 19th century England; she cites Ann Radcliff as one of her influences (de Beer 175). The most prevalent supernatural element are “footsteps.” The girl begins to hear them walking through the house at night while she is very young. It soon becomes apparent to the girl that they are a presence pursuing her. Throughout the novel, they become more insistent—becoming at times visible—until they take her away. The moment she is

overtaken by her “pursuers,” as she calls them, she also gets her first period and dies.

The various episodes are separated into sixteen chapters, all under twenty pages. The first four introduce the steps and other noises that begin to persecute the girl. Her persecutors effectively disappear for eight chapters (being mentioned only peripherally) during which her growing awareness of the female body and sexuality takes center stage. They, too, take on a gothic tinge—encountered as something that continually returns but that cannot be rationally accounted for. The last four chapters show the girl dealing with both these elements. In many of the episodes, the girl demonstrates how her persecutors and adult femininity leave her isolated and defenseless. If we take the narrator at her word, that taken together these episodes explain how she has come to be in hell, then she has created the perfect storm of symbolic suggestiveness that would lend to reading the novel as a feminist indictment of what it means to become a woman under patriarchy.

This is, in fact, the most prevalent reading of Boulosa’s text. As one commentator interprets the ending:

There is a conflation between the social signifiers of the house and the body. What it means to be a woman—reproducer of the social order—is tied to the family house and it is precisely within this “private” space of the family, “woman’s place,” where the (re)production of socially sexed subjects occurs. Trapped in this space but at the same time refusing to occupy it, the protagonist elects one of the few options available: she refuses the social meaning of femininity and at the same time withdraws into the undefined and shadowy world of her fantasies and memories. (Vaughn 132-33)

Here the commentator reads the narrator’s death through the lens of patriarchy where woman equals mother. Reaching the biological possibility of motherhood, the girl signals her refusal of

this possibility by dying, removing herself from the social scene where this is the fate of all girls. The same commentator arrives at this conclusion by referring to such psychoanalytically informed thinkers as Luce Irigaray who argues that woman is foreclosed from the symbolic as subject—she can only appear there as object. While Irigaray certainly works within a Lacanian perspective, she ultimately finds him to be too limiting and calls for a symbolic space where women could come to be subjects in their own right. However, it seems that such a theory begets readings in which the subjectivity already at work in the feminine individual is occluded. Bruce Fink explains:

insofar as she is viewed from the perspective of masculine culture, she is likely to be reduced to nothing more than a collection of male fantasy objects dressed up in culturally stereotypical clothes: *i(a)*, that is, an image that contains and yet disguises object (*a*). That may very well imply a loss of subjectivity in the common, everyday sense of the word—“being in control of one’s life,” “being an agent to be reckoned with,” and so on—but it no way implies a loss of subjectivity in the Lacanian sense of the term. *The very adoption of a position or stance with respect to (an experience of) jouissance involves and implies subjectivity.* Once adopted, a feminine subject will have come into being. (117)

This theoretical tenet too often is overlooked in critics of Lacan and in those who think of subjectivity only in terms of representation and recognition—social or symbolic. To read Boullosa’s text as a feminine lament about the feminine subject’s failure to be (in the social) is to fail to read the feminine subject that *is* (in the text).

Nevertheless, I would agree with the other readers of the novel that its central concern is a symbolic failure. But where they equate this failure with a social lack, i.e., the impossibility of being in the social other than as mother or the repression of feminine sexuality, I situate it in the

inadequacy of language (in the girl's experience of a disruptive enjoyment). The difference in these two readings—where we each situate lack—gets to the crux of what distinguishes the logic of hysteria and the logic of the feminine. The former sustains a demand for redress while the latter sustains a defect in the signifying order. Decoupling the girl's story from a critique of patriarchy allows the girl as subjectivized by this defect to come into view.

Flesh and Body

In her reading of what precipitates the girl into “hell,” Boullosa suggests that the girl's education in Catholicism's view of the body is central:

creo que esta historia no hubiera sido posible si no situó a la niña en un mundo en el que hubiera contacto con el mundo católico, donde el cuerpo está prohibido. Entonces por eso aparece la historia de las monjas y las vidas de santos. Aún cuando en la casa no hay el fervor católico, lo hay en todo lo que los rodea, es un mundo católica, en que el cuerpo está prohibido. Y el no poder acceder al cuerpo los condenan a esa vida horrible. (Ibsen 62)

Boullosa's use of the term *cuerpo* is striking especially as the girl's story is filled with bodily experiences, but it is also odd to say that Catholicism prohibits the body when, for example, the exposed body of Christ is the central image in Catholic iconography. Through the very image of Christ's body, the church invites the faithful and the suffering to contemplate his love. Protestant religions, for example, do not place the same emphasis on the image of Christ's body, preferring the cross without the corporal agony. The Catholic church also incorporates such bodily experiences as stigmata and possession in its world. Catholic churches to this day retain reliquaries where the bodily remains of saints and of holy men and women are preserved and displayed. The Catholic world (especially in comparison to the Protestant) seems, in fact,

welcoming of the body in its vision. Nevertheless, one does follow Boulosa's meaning: there is an antipathy to certain bodily experiences in the Catholic world. The restriction on contraception speaks to a prohibition of sex being anything other than a means for procreation. Sex as an end in itself, as sex for the pleasure of sex is not accepted. Similarly, gluttony (eating simply for pleasure and not a means of sustaining the body) is frowned upon. Boulosa herself speaks about the nuns at her school teaching her and the other girls to be ashamed of their bodies (Gallo interview). In the novel, the girl expresses her education in this shame when at summer camp she and the rest of the girls manage to change into their nightclothes without exposing any part of their body "porque nuestros cuerpos eran templos del Espíritu Santo que no debían ser vistos por nadie" (120). But is this view of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit a prohibition of it? It seems that for this to be so Boulosa's use of the word "body" assumes a certain understanding of it that "el mundo católico" of her novel does not accept. But perhaps their discord lies in each's conception of the body—perhaps they are not speaking about the same body.

It what follows I will argue that the body which is "prohibited" in the Catholic world is, what I will call, the modern one. This conclusion came to me in reading Boulosa's novel, but my reading was also informed by my understanding of what psychoanalysis tells us about the body, so I will offer first an account of the Catholic and modern bodies in relation to psychoanalysis. From there I will move into a consideration of how these two bodies figure in Boulosa's text and how the girl's subjectivity is in fact initially sustained through the space that the Catholic world gives to the body foreclosed in the modern.

Charles Shepherdson points to Freud's paper entitled "A Comparative Study of Traumatic and Hysterical Paralyses" from 1888 as the "dramatic rupture that separates [psychoanalysis] from organic medicine." In this paper, Freud argues that hysterical symptoms

do not follow, as Shepherdson puts it, the “laws of cause and effect,” “the model of natural science does not appear to function” when looking for the symptoms’ cause (*Vital Signs* 96). Instead, what Freud puts forth is that the hysterical symptom responds to “the force of an idea” (qtd. in Shepherdson). He notices, for example, that in hysterical paralysis what becomes paralyzed does not correspond to the “organic structure of the body” but to the “ordinary, popular sense of the names” of body parts: “the leg is the leg as far as its insertion into the hop; the arm is the upper limb as it is visible under the clothing” (qtd. in Shepherdson). In other words, in the hysteric’s symptom, Freud discovers that the organic body, which follows the rules of modern science, is overridden by another body, one given to us by language. Language has the ability to disrupt the natural functioning of the organism.

The seizure of the organism by language is experienced as a trauma, for the loss of the natural organization of the body introduces the subject to the death drive. Freud introduced the concept of the death drive to account for a repetition compulsion beyond the pleasure principle, “something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (*Beyond* 25). As we saw in the introduction, Lacan identifies the pleasure principle with the functioning of the signifier which regulates the subject’s relation to the traumatic lost object, *das Ding*⁵². By marking out a path around *das Ding*, the signifier maintains a distance between the subject and *das Ding* and leads the subject on the path of pleasure through substitute objects. However, this attempt to maintain a measured distance is always undermined by an insistent death drive, or what Lacan will call *jouissance*, that cannot be regulated by the signifier and thus routed through an object. The death drive is the insistent

⁵² In *L’Éthique de la psychanalyse*, Lacan says, “La fonction du principe du plaisir est en effet de porter le sujet de signifiant en signifiant, en mettant autant de signifiants qu’il est nécessaire à maintenir au plus bas le niveau de tension qui règle tout le fonctionnement de l’appareil psychique” (143).

reminder that the object has been lost and that the signifier is inadequate to restore it.

This situation gives rise to three bodies. Willy Apollon gives the following description:

The *organism*, the object of medical science, remains the basic meaning and structural limit for the living being. The *individual body*, a representative of the self and the personality in the social linkage, includes the relationship the subject sustains to the organism as source of the rejected jouissance resulting from cultural exigencies and the others' demands. The *parceled body*, whose parts are related to the jouissance the signifier has repudiated [...]. ("The Letter" 108)

The organism follows the laws of science; it is an object that science can recognize and thus manipulate, treat, prognosticate. It follows, as Shepherdson put it, the laws of cause and effect. The individual body is the body that we experience as ourselves. The individual body, however, is one that we assume in response to the death drive. In "Le stade du miroir," Lacan argues that we assume our bodies through identifying with the whole image that others recognize as us in the mirror. This body, as a whole image, serves as an "armor" against the parceled body or *corps morcelé* that analysis reveals is the experience of the death drive on the organism ("Le stade" 96).

McNulty explains that the logic of the mirror stage where the *corps morcelé* of the death drive is suppressed through an identification with an object (the image of the body) given by an other is the logic of seduction (*The Hostess* 179). Seduction is a logic in which an other comes to stand in the place of the structural Other of the address. The Other of the address is no one; it is simply the place that appears in the structure of speech. Seduction covers over the absence of this Other and institutes an interlocutor "in whose gaze [the subject] might find the representation of himself" (179). McNulty points out that in the Western tradition God has served as the most

prevalent Other of seduction (180). Not only do we see this in Descartes's introduction of God as the ultimate guarantee of his thinking being but also in cultural and individual narratives that situate God as an Other who supports identity. Here we might think of the US pledge of allegiance which states that it is under God that the nation comes into being as one and indivisible.

On the other hand, God has certainly exited from the Western social scene. He no longer has the same symbolic efficacy. Does this mean that Western cultures are more open to the death drive? Far from it, for "the fields of culture and civilization organize the forgetting of the Other's absence at the same time that they support the emergence of the body image" (180). How then might the West currently be organizing the possibilities of seduction to forget the Other's absence and to occult the *corps morcelé*? I think that Boullosa's critique of the Church's interdiction of the body is telling in this regard. The suggestion seems to be that the body in itself is unproblematic but "el mundo católico" prevents it from being so. I would suggest that the body Boullosa refers to here is what I would call the modern body. The modern body finds its support in the organic body which modernity has positioned as being a law unto itself. The move of modern societies is to bring us closer and closer into accordance with the law of the organism, for if we are seen as being removed from or out of touch with the organism, this is of our own doing by way of having created cultural, social, and environmental situations that impede the organism's natural well-being. Hence, for example, sexual desire (straight or queer) is understood as an expression of a natural, organic state and the cultural institutions that are seen to regulate this organic state are losing or have lost credibility. The move is to get rid of the cultural obstacles that prevent us from fully enjoying our "natural" sexuality; the social must give way to the natural so that we might be who we truly are, as one version of the argument

goes. Here we can see to what extent the organism and the individual body as representative of the self are collapsed in our modern societies where Science is used to ground all human experience within the logic of the organism. The organism (more so than Science, which serves more as a tool to help the organism speak more clearly) would seem to have replaced God as the Other who suppresses the disorganizing effects of the death drive and becomes the support for the unified experience of the body and thus of the self. How so?

Here I am indebted to McNulty's reading of Nietzsche in relation to Pierre Klossowski. She points to *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche critiques the "'teachers of the purpose of existence,' whose sole task is 'to do what is good for the preservation of the human race'" (195). These "teachers" may even speak in the name of God but their real interest is to promote the species. By assigning a purpose to life in the sanctification of the biological function of reproduction, in the preservation of the human race, these "teachers" assign teleology to the human being and thus erect a structure that returns to the speaking being the object that would *reorganize the corps morcelé*. McNulty explains: "Nietzsche implies that the teleological impulse is nothing other than a craving for *natural aims*: that is, for an aim that would neutralize the drives that call human life into question—causing it to 'open onto an abyss'—and reground them as instincts' (196). The organism itself can provide the support for occulting the death drive and representing the (coherent) self. We see this fantasy at work in our own day in the passion of scientists (as well as that of a public eager to believe) who want to explain all aspects of human culture in terms of evolution and the propagation of our genes. In these sorts of narratives, the organism also guarantees the ego's projects, shoring up a sense of a self as a unified body untroubled by *jouissance*: one works, strives for success, eats, marries, has sex, worries about one's looks, buys houses all in the goal of passing along one's genes and ensuring the survival of

the species. The upshot of these narratives is that “the self propogates itself by means of the organism” (195). Similarly, we see the same fantasy in discourses that would have the body censored by some cultural entity thereby preventing the self from being. Boullosa’s claim that the girl in *Antes* cannot be because she cannot have a body—it being denied in the Catholic world—shows to what extent the self and the organism are equated. Similarly, I would advance that Judith Butler’s call for other “viable bodies” so that these *selves* could have social being seems to share in this logic.

But does the Catholic world prohibit the “modern body”—this amalgam of the body as representative of the self and the natural organism? Here we can turn to St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans for an answer. Paul’s account of the body here expresses an orthodox, traditional Christian approach to our bodily experiences. In a much commented passage in Romans 7, Paul speaks about the deadliness of the Mosaic law for it introduces sin into the individual; thus the Christian must die to the “old written” law in order to be born again into the Spirit established by Christ’s resurrected body:

you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. (Romans 7: 4-6)

Paul sets up here a dichotomy between the sinful flesh and the life of the Spirit. This is a dichotomy well known to those raised in the Christian tradition—the dichotomy that Boullosa’s comment appears to reference. Within the Christian West itself there has been a long tradition of

critiquing this dichotomy. Secularists are particularly attuned to its denigration of the “body” and seek to redeem the body, removing the stain of sinfulness from bodily pleasures and reinscribing them in a discourse of natural organicity. But the body that Paul speaks about is not the organic body. He speaks rather about the *flesh* which is inflamed through the interdictions of the written Mosaic law. The Greek word he uses is *sarx* which translates as *flesh* while the Greek word that Paul uses for *body* is *soma*. Throughout his letters to the various first-century Christian congregations, Paul evokes these two terms to often signal two conceptions of the body. The body, the *soma* is not denigrated in Paul’s account while the flesh, *sarx* is. Indeed, Paul’s reasoning shows that we can get rid of the sinful *sarx* in order to live the *soma* in a new way.

Paul argues that the sinful *sarx* comes into being through the individual’s adherence to the Mosaic law. Adherence to the law precipitates an experience that disorganizes the self, causing it to lose a sense of unity by dividing the self between a desire to adhere and an impulse to sin. Paul describes the experience of the self under the law thus:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh (*sarx*). I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (Rom 7:14-23)

The self, the “I” here is disturbed by foreign impulses that dwell within him and prevent him from being of “one mind.” In other words, Paul’s provides us with a description of an experience of the death-driven *corps morcelé*. With his language, Paul dismembers and flays his body: his self (“it is no longer I”) disappears in the experience of heterogeneous disparate “members” and “flesh” animated by the sin introduced by the law. Paul’s concern is to nullify the law in order to kill this disruptive experience, but in so doing, he “conflates the ‘father’s law’ —the Oedipal interdiction or ‘thou shalt not’ —with castration itself, the alienation of being by language” (McNulty “Feminine Love” 202). Paul’s discourse demonstrates a fantasy that the death drive is simply an effect of some particular law and not the residue left by the organism’s capture in the symbolic. By overcoming this particular law, Paul argues, the self can regain a lost unity.

As we saw, Paul opposes flesh and spirit, but he also opposes the flesh to the body. Whereas the flesh is primarily disruptive (the site of sinful desires), the *soma* primarily refers to the body as visible form which he sees as forming a unified whole. Though the *soma* would appear to be composed of disparate parts, it in fact is one:

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body [soma]. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the *soma* which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the *soma* which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the *soma*, having greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the *soma*, but that the members should have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:20-6)

The *soma* is not a divided entity—all its *members* function harmoniously together. The *soma*

then recalls the image of the whole body that the child identifies with in the mirror stage. It is the body that covers over the literal and figurative flesh; as such, it endures into the new life of the spirit. Paul, for example, conjoins the *soma* and the spirit when he writes: “do you not know that your *soma* is the temple of the Holy spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your *soma* and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Body and spirit, therefore, are not opposed in Paul’s account—provided that “body” is understood as form or *Gestalt*. Paul does not prohibit this body; indeed, this body supports the spirit. In psychoanalytic terms, the *soma* ensures the self whereas the flesh “kills” the self by dispossessing it of its unified somatic support. The body, then, that Boullosa sees as interdicted in the Catholic world is not the body that would prevent the girl in *Antes* from being a self.

But if Paul’s reasoning allows a mapping of the *corps morcelé* onto the *sarx* and the body image onto the *soma*, where can we locate the organism in Paul’s account? On the one hand, Paul sometimes seems to use both *sarx* and *soma* to refer to a body that neutrally exists, a body without a relation to the law or the spirit. On the other hand, the organism does not exist for Paul. If the organism is understood as the natural body which appears within the scientific field and is animated by an instinct to fulfill its biological function, then this body does not appear to exist within Paul’s account. But in our day the organism does not simply exist as the object of medical science; as we have seen, it also exists as a guarantor for a teleology of human existence by providing a natural aim to our aimless existence thereby covering over the objectless death drive. To locate the organism in Paul’s account, we should not look for the object of medical science but for that which functions to hide the traumatic dimension of the death drive. Paradoxically, it is the spirit (*pneuma*) of God that serves this function:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the *sarx*, but according to the *pneuma*. For the law of the *pneuma* of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

What the law could not do in that it was weak through the *sarx*, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful *sarx*, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the *sarx*, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the *sarx* but according to the *pneuma*. (Romans 8: 1-4)

Paul speaks of being animated by the law of the spirit and no longer by the law of the flesh, rendering him free from sin and death. In other words, the spirit in effect removes the sin that resides in his members so that he no longer experiences a dissolution of the self in the surging forth of the death drive. Sin no longer dwells within him as he is born again as a body in the spirit.

The body that Paul gives to the Christian church is not the modern body. Paul never addresses the body untouched by a (non-natural) law; the conceptions of the body that he transmits do not include one where it would be something like a natural organism. It, therefore, makes little sense to say that the church forbids the body as we understand it, for it does not deal with or address the same body as the secular world does. And while it does offer its own fantasy for covering over the death drive, it still allows a space for a non-organic corporeal experience. Here I am not thinking simply of occurrences of stigmata and possession that primarily the Catholic Church recognizes but also the experience of grace or of rapture. Thus, the Christian church remains in our day one of the few institutions that lends credibility to a bodily experience in excess of the laws of the organism. In other words, far from being repressive of some unmarked body, the church provides a symbolic space where the loss of the unmarked body

could perhaps find a signifier. The psychoanalyst Lucie Cantin in her reading of Teresa of Avila's experience argues that the saint finds exactly such a space in the church.⁵³ If in the past Western culture was more permissive of "religious signifiers,"⁵⁴ it has become less and less so since the organism began to function to occult the death drive.

In Boullosa's novel, we will see how the modern body turns out to be inadequate to the girl's experience of the death drive and how the excessive body of religious experience actually sustains the girl in her truth procedure. And by looking at the girl's bodily experiences as well as her reaction to them, the novel no longer reads as a complaint but as an account of a subjectivity determined not to give up on the symbolic.

Undecidably Dead

Arriving at the end of *Antes*, one is obliged to ask a question: has she (the protagonist) really died? How is one to understand the final sentence, pronounced by the narrator herself: "El doctor no podría explicarle los motivos de mi muerte."? If the narrator is dead, then how is she speaking, pronouncing her own death? The reader has the convenient hermeneutic move of interpreting the death as symbolic thereby suturing this problematic pronouncement, rendering it intelligible. And yet the pronouncement itself contains a bone that sticks in this interpretation's craw: it is reporting "the doctor's" pronouncement. It moves the judgment of this death out of the world of symbols and into the realm of science. That is, it tells us that the death has already been read by one who does not read symbols but the organism. For the scientific reader, the organism is dead. At the same time, the organism's death remains opaque to the doctor for he cannot read

⁵³ See "La féminité: d'une complicité à la perversion à une éthique de l'impossible" in *Savoir* 2: 1-2 (May 1995). 47-85.

⁵⁴ In his book *The Lacanian Subject*, Bruce Fink writes, "And whereas in the past, it was fairly well accepted for women to devote themselves to the religious life in convents, eschewing the defining relation to a man, today even that recourse is frowned upon, that is to say, the Other is making certain religious signifiers harder and harder to adopt" (116).

its causes. He, too, would seem to be a hasty, if not impotent, reader. Thus, within this sudden and curt final sentence, a dense *mise-en-abyme* is staged where the symbolic and the literal endlessly undercut one another.

If I qualify this *mise en abyme* as dense, it is to get at its tendency to be overlooked by scholarly and critical readers of the novel. All comment on the death, but they invariably lean to either a symbolic or a literal reading. In her analysis of the novel, the scholar Alicia Rico gives this overview of the critics' positions:

La mayoría interpreta que la última escena corresponde a la primera menstruación de la protagonista quien abandona la infancia de forma abrupta. Desde este punto de vista, es una novella de aprendizaje o de rito de pasaje a la pubertad, donde la niña vive los hechos y la narradora es la mujer adulta que analiza su infancia. Esta forma narrativa se asocia tradicionalmente con las novelas autobiográficas en las que hay una distancia temporal entre el narrador y el protagonista. Entre los críticos que optan por esta versión se encuentran John Brushwood, Gabriella de Beer, [Carol] Clark D'Lugo y Margo Glantz. Personalmente, pienso junto con Cecilia Olivares Mansuy y Roselyn Costantino, que la narradora es la protagonista muerta." (57-8)

Here Rico identifies the two camps within which critics fall, but in so doing, she brings to the forefront how the death functions critically. The narrator's/protagonist's death splits the critics between those who would inscribe its status in a traditional coming of age narrative and those who see its status as moving the narrative into the genre of what Tzvetan Todorov calls the fantastical.⁵⁵ Hence the status of the death functions as a critical linchpin that determines how the novel will be read. Certain readers do attempt to leave the question in abeyance—simply

⁵⁵ See *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970).

signaling the two possible readings—but they remain within the conceptual field instated by the two possibilities. It is my contention that the death must be implicitly if not explicitly decided on for a reading to occur. To read the novel is in one way or another to read the narrator/protagonist's death and thus her body.

I, too, am obliged to read this death, but I will do so not so much with a view to decide whether it is literal or symbolic but to explain why, in the context of the novel, the divide between the body and the symbolic collapses such that death itself becomes difficult to read. I will do this by taking into account the chronology of this exceedingly fragmented narrative. In fact, the narrative timeline is delineated if one pays attention to the narrator's structuring of them. The novel begins from a place that is temporally "after"—after what?—the text at this point is not entirely clear. We are simply informed that the narrator addresses us from a place of solitude reigned by fear; however, a clue appears to be given in the narrator's comments on childhood: "Cierto, yo era como esos niños, yo era esos niños y aquí estoy, divorciada de su mundo para siempre. ¡Niños! ¡Yo era lo que ustedes son!" (12). The suggestion would be that the "before" of the title is childhood itself and that hence the narrator addresses us from the "afterlife" of this period. The incipit suggests that the novel touches on a coming of age narrative, but one in which coming of age is experienced primarily as loss. To the extent that the narrator insists on the loss that has occurred in her arrival to the other side of "before," the novel resists being labeled a *Bildungsroman* proper. If the *Bildungsroman* proper is defined by the formation (both as process and outcome) of the protagonist, then as a genre it is more interested in what is acquired than what is lost (or acquired at the expense of what is lost). This being the case, *Antes* like the other novels considered in this study should more properly be called failed *Bildungsromane*. But this is only if we look at *Bildung* as a matter of identity formation or of

social integration. *Antes* (and the other novels) resituates feminine *Bildung* on the subjective plane, where “subjective” partakes of both the Lacanian and Badiouian notions of the term, i.e., as that which is inside the social/situation but irreducible to it.

Following the incipit, the novel appropriates that most appropriate of *Bildungsroman* beginnings: the protagonist’s birth. The narrator returns to her birth (in Mexico City, 1954) and we have the novel’s first proper episode. As at her death so at her birth, the narrator manages to be present in order to report on it. If the ostensible reason for choosing to recount the events she does is to explain how she has ended up where she is, then the narrator starts here because this is where she meets the fear that defines much of her experience. It should be noted that the fear precedes any of the causes with which it will later be associated. The fear that will be with her for the rest of her life (and after) appears in fact in the face of her mother: “cuando la vi por primera vez tenía en todos sus rasgos reflejado el miedo que no imaginé brincaría a mí para nunca dejarme” (13). The fear that will dog her throughout her life is transmitted to her through her mother. Indeed, the steps, unidentifiable sounds in the night, the disembodied faces that menace, the nameless “pursuers” that cause her to live in fear seem to come into existence in order to give a cause to this fear whose original cause in the mother is unknown. The girl’s first memory would be an experience of this unmediated relation to the mother in which she is overwhelmed by this Other—an experience suggestive of the subject’s being “invaded,” as Juliet Flower MacCannell puts it⁵⁶, by the jouissance of the Other or an unmediated death drive. But almost at the same time, the protagonist speaks of being constituted as a body through the mother’s gaze and the names that she gives to the girl’s body parts: “En el momento en que nací [...] mi mamá, en cambio, no se durmió; me miró con una mirada que me recorrió el cuerpo

⁵⁶ See her article “Jouissance Between the Clinic and the Academy: The Analyst and Woman” in *Qui Parle* 9:2 (Spring/Summer 1996). 115.

poniéndome en todas las partes que le componían su nombre respectivo, volteándome huesos y piel con un sentimiento similar a la ternura, como no me volvió a ver nunca nadie” (14). This figuration of the mother as the Other of seduction whose gaze constitutes an object that gives the subject consistent being is shortly shown to have disappeared.

The narrator throughout the text at moments no longer speaks of memories but of her current situation. Her first “aside” appears shortly after her birth. She briefly indicates the passage of infancy and early childhood—two periods in which it is revealed that the father, as opposed to the mother, does not look at her until she is ready to be a playmate and that her mother and grandmother are the great loves of her life. Her mother and grandmother (the two Esthers) caress, cuddle, and play with her. And then the aside abruptly changes the tone; from the paradise of childhood we plunge into hell:

Afuera a veces escucho a las que vienen persiguiendo y aun no les dan caza. ¿O serán las mismas? Aúllan, tienen horror de los que las persiguen. Corren, vuelan, son capaces de cualquier cosa para salvarse. Han de ser otras cada noche, seguramente, seguramente porque ninguna podría escapar, es imposible escapar, que nadie intente engañarse. (15)

As one commentator remarks, Boullosa uses the imagery of “la persecución religiosa de la Edad Media o novohispana” to demonstrate “las consecuencias de la institucionalización del terror” (Reid 208). The dominant reading would see this figuration of girls as heretics and witches who are hounded by the Inquisition then imprisoned when they become women as evidence of Boullosa’s critique of the Catholic Church and Mexican patriarchy in the late twentieth century. Again, the girl’s problem is read as social. While this certainly is valid reading and one that Boullosa herself appears to support, the text is far more equivocal about what terrorizes the girl. The above passage is followed by the comment that the narrator is frightened and that she would

like to cry out “*mamá*,” but she is unable to: “*Es un grito que no puedo emitir*,” she says, “*porque esa palabra no la tengo*” (15). The text, of course, belies this claim for she has used this very word to declare its absence. Rather, this word has lost its referent: in the hell where she finds herself, there is no motherly figure, no loving Other to whom she can appeal: the (m)Other of seduction has fallen away. Boullosa’s formulation is actually quite striking, for she equates the absence of this Other with an absence in language. I cannot call for help, she effectively says, because the word lacks. By evoking the very word that is said to lack, moreover, the text cleverly demonstrates that the problem is not a matter of “finding the right word.” The right word is not “it.” In other words, while this passage suggests social critique (and gestures to the mother’s powerlessness to protect her daughters under patriarchy), it stages a problem with language, showing that the narrator’s situation has a link to an absence therein.

From this “aside,” the narrator returns to her memories, briefly recounting a game played with her father, and then she explains the appearance of her pursuers. They appear first as steps in the night that prevent her from sleeping out of fear, but she pays them little attention. She sleeps through her classes at school. It is at school that the first extended episode occurs; indeed, it reads as the real beginning of the narrative, what precedes it reading more like soft-focus vignettes. One day during recess, another student, Enela, invites her into an abandoned henhouse in the schoolyard where the girl hears the footsteps and she is shocked to find out that Enela hears them too. Enela informs the girl that the steps have in fact instructed her to ask the girl to explain what they are. Understanding now that the steps are for her, the girl is so frightened that she runs away. This is the beginning of a series of events during which the steps will show themselves to be more and more insistent until the narrative becomes more interested in the girl’s bodily experiences—precipitated by an event in which the girl is caught by real persecutors, to

which I will return. For the moment what is of interest is that the narrative proceeds chronologically until midway through the novel. At this point, the narrator goes back in time to an episode after her birth but before the first episode with the steps, i.e., the episode with Enela. In essence, this episode is the first incident in all the incidents that lead her to where she is.

She recedes back to 1962, when she would be about eight years old, to an episode whose function in the narrative is difficult to pinpoint. As mentioned earlier, the first four chapters deal in one way or another with the girl's encounters with her pursuers as she proceeds through the banality of a girl's daily life; beginning with chapter five, the episodes shift the narrative focus to the girl's body, but the following episode, chapter seven, seems less easily associated with these themes. The girl is at home with her sisters watching a bullfight on television (which her parents are attending). While they watch, they are playing a word game. The girl's turn has come "cuando," she relates,

vi cómo Juanita [the maid], sin darse cuenta, apoyaba su mano en la aguja del bordado [...]. Vi claramente la aguja cruzándole la piel y a Juanita con la mirada pegada a la pantalla mientras con el brazo continuaba empujando su mano para que la aguja entrara más adentro... [...] Pude decir, señalando a Juanita "¡alza la mano!", mientras a mis ojos y a los de mis hermanas la aguja lenta, inexorable, seguía entrando hasta asomarse del otro lado de la palma limpia, sin gota de sangre. Male [one of her older half-sisters] le alzó la mano a Juanita: palma de madera, revestimiento de estuco: una santa traspasada, una aguja picando carne incorpórea, engendro de abstinencias, ayunos y silicios. [...] Frente a nosotras agarró con los dientes el ojo de la aguja y tiró para sacarla completamente limpia, como si en lugar de entrar en carne hubiera traspasado tela.

La tres nos miramos, juraría que con el mismo golpe de ojos, sin parpadear,

cómplices de algo incomprendible. (85-6)

After this episode, the narrative resumes where it had chronologically left off, which is 1964. The girl is back at school and confronting new bodily experiences. So what is the episode of the needle doing here at the center of the text, appearing as a kind of navel? What has it got to do with the dominant narrative whose unfolding it seems to interrupt? I would argue that its function is clear if we think about it in terms of the girl's education about the body. What she observes here, or at least what the narrator attempts to represent in this episode, is that the body as the girl understands it can in fact follow an entirely different logic, rendering it incomprehensible. The girl's incredulity of the maid's non-reaction and of her wound's lack of blood demonstrates that the girl understands the body to be the modern body: an organism that supports the self. The wound *should* bleed and Juanita (the person) *should* feel wounded, her being pierced and destabilized.⁵⁷ Instead, Juanita confronts the girl with a body that is not simply a body, just an organism of flesh and blood that coincides with the self. Juanita's flesh fails to be flesh, behaving instead like cloth. At the same time, the passage encases Juanita's incomprehensible hand in religious imagery, suddenly setting it off against the mundane world of embroidery needles and inattentive hands, of maids and little girls watching television on a Saturday afternoon?⁵⁸ What are we to make of the flurry of religious references that crystallize around this insubstantial hand?

The passage seems to be divided about what it means to evoke with these references. On

⁵⁷ This episode resonates strongly with a scene from the 1962 film *Sigmund Freud*, in which Montgomery Clift portrays the eponymous character. Freud "discovers" the unconscious, in part because he watches how hysterics can be pierced with needles and feel nothing.

⁵⁸ The novel makes no mention of what happens in the bullfight. The girl herself only watches in order to pick out her parents in the crowd; failing to do so, she turns her attention to reading the advertisements on the ring's walls. However, it is of interest to note that Juanita herself cannot take her eyes off the screen. Perhaps her being pierced reflects the matador being gored on the screen.

the one hand, the hand's flesh is transfigured into the material of icons (the image of Jesus' pierced body particularly) seen in church while the piercing evokes the idea of St. Theresa, who is pierced by God's love. With these references, the passage evokes a religious experience of divine grace, of God's spirit dispossessing the body of the self. On the other hand, religious practices which mortify the flesh are referenced to account for Juanita's hand not behaving like flesh. Such practices evoke a different image of religious experiences, one in which, recalling Boulosa's phrase, the body is prohibited. I have not found any commentators who directly address this passage, but it could perhaps be read to add to the evidence against the Catholic world in its education of little girls. One could read it as a condemnation of Juanita's religious education which has taught her to suppress her physical experiences. The episode is also woven into a critique of the Catholic Church's complicity in class oppression continued in the following episode; thus, the religious imagery here also indicates the symbolic coordinates whereby the poor deny their suffering, displacing it from the social to the spiritual. The narrator furthers this critique when she remarks that Juanita returned to her school (the girl's mother returns her because Juanita does not perform her duties well enough) where she will learn "a no hacer nada, a despreciar todo cuanto era su mundo con mayor perfección" (87). However, I contend that the evocation of the religious does not speak so much to Juanita's experience as to the girl's. The narrator is not speaking for Juanita, but to the girl's attempt to give sense to what she has seen with the symbolic tools available to her. When she produces a hodgepodge of references, she demonstrates to what extent the incident confounds her understanding and also to what extent she has yet to fully assimilate the religious images and practices she has heard about. Literarily, the hodgepodge speaks to a stylistic device to render a child's perception. But structurally it shows that, for the girl, the religious functions to symbolically *support* a body in excess of the

organic flesh. Through the religious imagery, the girl signals this excessive body that is, as she puts it, “immaterial flesh.” Religion does not serve to prohibit the modern body so much as it attempts to provide a space for the immaterial flesh that the modern body itself prohibits. This episode functions as the representation of the girl’s first encounter with the body’s capacity to be opaque to sense and shows that religion might serve as an interpretive net in which something of modernity’s prohibited body can be caught in sense. It is not religion that removes the possibility of the body, but religion which responds to the body’s immaterial qualities and attempts to metaphorize this excess.

But this incident is not the event that subjectivizes her, making of her a feminine subject engaged in a truth procedure. Faced with Juanita’s unwounded hand, the girl remains uncomprehending and indeed oblivious as this troubling incident becomes forgotten in the continuation of the afternoon’s games. When her parents return from the bullfight, it is not even mentioned. In Badiouian terms, the truth of the excessive body remains occluded for the girl for she is still operating within the encyclopedia of the situation—that is, she continues as though what has happened can be accounted for and named in the current situation, if only by a childish understanding of religious imagery and practices. Ultimately, the girl at first sees nothing, and this is why the episode does not appear in chronological order. In the novel, it appears rather after the event and thus retroactively becomes inscribed in the girl’s truth procedure whereby we can see that the occurrence of religious references serves to mark a problem that the girl only afterwards can discern.

The episode of Juanita’s hand is immediately followed by another that is equally baffling but whose meaning becomes clear if it is read in relation to Juanita and to the event that precipitates the girl into a truth procedure. The episodes reveal themselves to be a tightly woven

together as the girl brings the event into relation to an expanding number of incidents in order to give consistency to the what has occurred to her. In other words, this episode reveals her to be still faithful.

A new chapter introduces the incident. We have returned to the 1968; the narrative resumes in chronological order. The narrator begins by informing us that the Catholic school she attended has as its motto *servium*. Her mother, who is an artist, suggests that the school hold a drawing competition in which the students will pictorially interpret their understanding of this injunction to serve. In response to this demand, the girl produces the following image in ocher tones:

un niño pequeño, acostado como un bebé pero de mayor edad, cuyo cuerpo cubrí de clavitos, de clavos que serían pequeños afuera de las proporciones del dibujo, o sea enormes alcayatas con cabeza de clavos enterradas en su cuerpo inmóvil y en su rostro que, si no dejaba de sonreír, casi podría decirse que lo hacía. Ni una lágrima, ni una herida, ni una señal de dolor. Luego, pinté atrás de él una cama, un oso de peluche y un sonriente sol que en la parte superior del dibujo resplandecía, casi quemando las alas de unas gaviotas (o algo que quería parecer gaviotas) que pasaban volando.

Abajo le escribí CLAVITOS. (93)

As a response to the demand that she represent her vision of the school's idea of serving, this drawing obviously lends itself to a reading that the novel mounts a critique against the girl's religious education. The suggestion seems to be that religion's demand to serve stultifies the girl, subjecting her body to misery as it calls for at least an outward sign of resigned forbearance, pictured here by the fixed smile. But following as it does the episode of the maid's pierced hand, the drawing repeats too many elements to not suggest a link. Particularly, we should pay

attention to the fact that Juanita was a maid, she served, she was in service (and indeed as the pampered daughter of a well-to do family, the girl has had few other encounters with acts of service; furthermore, Juanita was trained by nuns). Thus, I would argue that the drawing is an artistic working over of the encounter with the maid Juanita's pierced hand, to which Juanita had reacted with such *sang froid*. To serve, the drawing seems to say, is "to serve" this body that does not follow the rules of the organism. But how should we understand the various elements that appear to replace the needle, Juanita, her hand, and her *sang froid*?

The pierced person in the drawing is a child whose entire body is subjected to piercing—an entire body of immaterial flesh—and the girl adds a detail that Juanita lacked: the beatific smile. To understand why these elements appear in the reworking, we need to consider them in relation to an episode that happens earlier in the novel.

The Agreeable Event

At the end of chapter four, the girl finds herself in relative security. Her pursuers seem muted and she imagines that she is perhaps "un blanco menos notorio que las otras." "Fue [the start of the school year] bueno," she tells, "sí, me engañó en un principio, me hizo sentir que no había problema conmigo, que yo era como las otras" (53). Like Frankie in the preceding chapter, the girl in *Antes* experiences her pre-evental self as unmarked from others, an indication of the profound alteration that the event will effect. She continues, "pero toda esta ilusión fue a dar al traste aquel martes que entré al baño a media lección de aritmética" (53). Chapter five, in which we will learn what happens in the restroom on that Tuesday, carries a bit before getting to the point, but the matter it carries over becomes important. The girl and her sisters all wear the same underwear everyday: panties and camisoles in white cotton, each sporting a little blue, yellow, or pink bow, the epitome of little girl's underwear. As befitting respectable bourgeois girls, she and

her sisters have been wearing them for years. But this year, the girl convinces her grandmother to buy white nylon slips for her and her two sisters—a symbol, for the girl, of adult femininity. At home, the three girls play “feminine” with their slips, putting on a fashion show in front of the mirror, which reflects back to them “él tres modelos niñas mostraban moños en la cabeza, peinados que nos parecían fantásticos y el mismo fondo blanco en tres distintas tallas” (57). Thus, the chapter starts out under the sign of a newly discovered, newly accessible femininity. Whereas before the girl has given no hint that the world of adult femininity, with all its accoutrements, was of interest to her, she now demonstrates that this world has come into her view. The slip serves as the symbol of her nascent transition from girl to woman. She is wearing the slip, and not her usual girlish cotton camisole, the Tuesday she steps into the school restroom.

There are two high school girls, whom the protagonist does not recognize, engaged in a water bomb fight. As the protagonist is in the toilet stall, one of the older girls reaches under and snatches her panties from around her feet. When the girl comes out of the stall and asks for her underwear, the big girls point to the ceiling, showing that they have plastered her panties there with water bombs. The girls, in an echo of her menacing pursuers, threaten her to ensure her silence. The girl decides to leave without her underwear but finds her way blocked by a third girl whose school sweater covers “un cuerpo bien formado de mujer” (59)—a seemingly unimportant detail, yet its mention demonstrates again that the feminine body is present in the girl’s thoughts. More importantly, it stages textually that a woman’s body produces what happens to her. The older girl challenges her to escape the restroom, which the girl attempts—an attempt that proves futile. In effect, this is the first time that the girl is pursued in human form: by a woman’s body, which does catch her. This contact with “woman” is both violent and agreeable...

¿que me hacían? Me hacían cosquillas. Si siempre las había detestado, esta vez me hacían incluso detestarme porque arrancaban de mi cuerpo enmiedecidos risas que parecían alegres y espontáneas, porque si me hacían sufrir también me daba una dolorosa sensación de que era *agradable*. Como podía, me zafaba y me volvían a atrapar entre las tres grandes, excitadas y maliciosamente silenciosas. (59)

Though the narrator herself does not associate this experience with her disembodied pursuers, the Inquisitional imagery that has characterized their pursuit is repeated here. In fact, the disembodied pursuers could be said to give presence to what cannot be fully avowed in her experience of being caught by the older girls. But what actually is her experience? While this scene evinces a corporeal violation akin to rape, it situates the violation in a peculiar place: within her own body. What is remarkable about the tickling “esta vez” is that the girl experiences her own body as “serving” an enjoyment that is heterogeneous to her self. *She* is suffering but her body does not. The text signals an excess in the word agreeable by setting it off in italics. Thus, not simply agreeable, but agreeable in a way that agreeable does not get at. Recalling an earlier formulation: agreeable is the right word, but the right word is not it. The body signals this problem with language for the girl. At this moment, the girl has a knowing about the inadequacy of the self sustained by the phallic signifier to account for the body’s experience (McNulty 206). The body thereby becomes an excess in need of a metaphor to channel it. This is the body that will appear later in the drawing and allows us to understand the significance of the artistic reworking: the tickling fingers become little piercing nails that immobilize her and draw from her an inscrutable smile, a visual trace of the agreeable pain. The incident on that Tuesday afternoon when she goes to the restroom is the event that makes a woman of her.

My reading may appear unnecessarily abstruse: one could take a phallic tack and see the

troublingly excessive agreeable sensation as latent (or even unavowed) sexual excitation⁵⁹, or one could see nothing at all (despite the text's italicized insistence)—simply a girl describing the paradoxically painful and pleasurable experience of being tickled. In this sense, this scene carries very much the mark of an event as Badiou conceives it: “l'essence de l'événement,” he writes in *L'Être et l'événement*, “est d'être indécidable” (224). This is why it requires what Badiou calls in *L'Éthique* “quelqu'un” who is subjectivized by it and remains faithful to this subjectivization. Thus, we in effect know when there has been an event if there is subjectivization and fidelity to something new. The event is less important than the consequences it entails.⁶⁰ To see how this *agreeable* pain functions as an event, we must look to its consequences.

I situate the event at this moment when the girl has a bodily pleasure in excess of her own pain because something new immediately follows it. The water bombs begin to fall from the ceiling, one of which falls on her neck and slides down her back with the following consequences: “Dejé de prestar atención a las tres grandes. Sentí como me ardía la espalda. La pegué a la pared para protegerme, instintivamente, y el ardor se calmo” (59). Now, for the first time, her body does not respond to the logic of the organism, or the modern body, its logic is as it

⁵⁹ Here is how one reader commentates the incident:

This scene of powerlessness and loss of control is framed by observation of the older girl's well-formed body and the revelation that her own body was betraying her, giving signals of pleasure in response to physical torment. In this way, the episode of common childhood teasing takes on an air of sexual tension not understood by the girl. [...] Her body betrays her by reacting with sounds of pleasure instead of anger, demonstrating her loss of personal control. The door to her sexuality has been opened, and as a result, when the “holy” water falls onto her slip, it burns her as if it were fire instead of water, judging not her soul, but her powerlessness in the face of new sexuality. (102-3) From *A Life of One's Own: Mexican Fictions of Female Development* (Stephanie Leigh Vague).

⁶⁰ Bruno Bosteels notes in his book *Alain Badiou, une trajectoire polémique* that one of the major shifts between the two works *L'Être et l'événement* and *Les logiques des mondes* is the one from nomination to consequences. Whereas in the former naming is the first post-evental intervention, in the latter the important thing is to “s'incorporer à ce qu'elle [the trace of the event] autorise comme conséquences” (qtd in Bosteels 146).

were overridden by a different kind of logic: the girl feels that water is burning her skin. This is the first indication that she has been subjectivized by the event.

But why should this bodily experience be a sign of “a someone” who has been traversed and seized by the truth that femininity accesses, namely, that the phallic signifier is defective? In her explication of Lacan’s claim that woman is not-all under the phallus and thus open to a non-phallic enjoyment, McNulty points to Lacan’s equation of phallic *jouissance* to orgasm as a suggestion that feminine *jouissance* beyond the phallus would not be localized to the genital organs. Since orgasm “attempts to limit the drive by localizing *jouissance* in the genital zone, provisionally anchoring it to a sexual aim,” feminine *jouissance*, to the contrary, would not be experienced as anchored to an organic aim. Therefore, feminine enjoyment “may be traumatic or even incapacitating, repetitively staging itself within the subject’s body through the somatic symptom, a straying *jouissance* she cannot defend against or account for.” The feminine body (which cannot be reduced to the female organism) is less caught in the fantasy of the modern body, “is less able to repress the fragmented body of the drives, or *corps morcelé*” (210). As such, it is a body open to a new metaphor for desire. With this in mind, I am tempted to suggest that had our protagonist lined herself up under the phallic banner, she would have perhaps responded to the older girls’ touch by becoming sexually aroused. As not-all (and *not* not at all) under the phallus, the feminine subject, of course, has recourse to the phallic solution, but she is also may respond to the beyond of the phallus. When faced with the disruptively pleasurable sensation, the girl in the novel does not become genitally aroused; she instead burns. It is her decision to respond to the beyond of the phallus that constitutes her as a feminine subject. It is here that I think Badiou’s ethics of fidelity might shed some light on Lacan’s gesture towards a choice in the subject’s assumption of sexuality. In the same way that Badiou speaks of an ethics

of fidelity to someone's subjectivization by an event, that is, an ethics of choosing to interrogate what new possibilities arise from the event that has befallen one, Lacan's theory of sexuation speaks to a choice in someone's encounter with the limitations of the symbolic's proffered solution for dealing with the death drive, that is, the phallus. The feminine subject for Lacan is "someone" who does not deny the phallus but chooses to remain faithful to its lack. But she does so not simply to hold open this lack—that is the hysteric's position; instead, she is faithful to it in order to create a new situation where another signifier responds to the death drive thus accessing a supplemental jouissance.

Does this mean then that she dies to the old law and is born again into the law of the spirit, to return to Paul's terminology? Does the feminine subject need to kill the flesh (*sarx*)? Recall that in Paul's framework the flesh becomes sinful through the effects of the law: the law forbids an object thereby inciting desire for it. Paul terms "flesh" this experience of unlawful desire which insists and which he experiences as a stranger within. But the flesh functions in Paul's account as a primarily masculine experience of the *corps morcelé*, for as a subject who is not-all under the phallic function, the feminine subject is not entirely addressed by the law that would designate the forbidden object. Indeed, in the Mosaic law that incites the flesh, woman appears primarily as a forbidden object and not the subject to whom the law is addressed. The Decalogue, for example, does not prohibit women from coveting their neighbor's husband. Similarly, the Jewish law does not address itself to the female body in that there is no equivalent of female circumcision whereby the law marks the body and signals the individual's subjection to it. For the feminine subject, the law does not incite the flesh because it does not designate any

object that is particularly forbidden her⁶¹. Instead, the feminine subject attests to the insistence of the flesh beyond the law. The flesh beyond the law loses its “sinful” quality for it no longer functions in relation to a prohibition, which means that the feminine subject is provided with no readymade means to (unconsciously) fantasize a solution for the lack imposed by the signifier. The law symbolizes this structural lack, but in doing so, it supports the fantasy that this lack is contingent, i.e., a loss. Disconnected from any prohibition, the flesh does not seek or yearn for some forbidden or unattainable enjoyment but finds itself aimless, wandering, in search as it were of a prohibition by which it could momentarily enjoy a simple pleasure. Hence, it might suddenly erupt from the touch of a water bomb falling from a restroom ceiling on a Tuesday afternoon—its first ardently pulsating sensation in the wake of an ego momentarily eclipsed. To the extent that the Catholic Church only addresses the body through prohibitions, it brings the body into being as a correlate of the law, as sinful flesh. And to that extent, Boullosa is correct to say that it prohibits the protagonist from having a body since her flesh is not a correlate of the law. Paradoxically, the girl demonstrates that this flesh in excess of the law finds room for itself in the symbolic network provided by the Catholic world.

Once the older girls are gone, the protagonist takes off her shirt and discovers that her womanly nylon slip has been rent and now has a large hole in the back, where she had also felt the burning water. This causes her first attempt to lodge her experience in the symbolic realm—the second act of fidelity and the commencement of the truth procedure. Here is how she explains what happened and her reaction to it:

En el fondo portaba la llaga, el estigma. Las tres grandes que habían llenado de luz el
baño eran ángeles, la pálida ángel rebelde, la morena ángel del bien, la que se paró en el

⁶¹ I am grateful for this insight to Shanna Carlson, who, in her essay “Transgender Subjectivity and Sexual Difference,” wonderfully explicates this point.

pasillo era ángel guardián del purgatorio. Mis calzones eran mi alma, con los que sostenían entre ellos la lucha legendaria. El agua que me había quemado la espalda era agua bautismal, incendiando mi fe, ardiendo en mi cuerpo como una llama de sabiduría divina...

[...]

Usando el fondo al revés, con la espalda por delante, el estigma quedaba en el lugar donde el romano clavó su lanza. Pinté la orilla del hoyo con crayón oscuro, me inventé con una rama una corona de espinas sin espinas, intenté una aureola con un gancho de metal pero no me sirvió de nada porque mis hermanas no quisieron participar en el juego de santa y mártir. (60-1)

The reaction to this burning is quite striking, in my opinion, not so much for the content of the reaction but that the reaction is to give the burning a meaningful representation. She attempts to make the body's (and not the self's) experience *signify*. The burning sensation becomes the trace of the agreeable pain which has burned a hole in her sensical modern body, a hole which she attempts to mark in the signifying order. That is, she demonstrates that the correlate of this excessive body is a hole in meaning. The "Catholic world" functions to provide the means of marking this correlate with the symbol of the stigmata. As in the previously discussed episode of Juanita's hand, religious references swarm to the spot where meaning fails in relation to the body. Couched in this seemingly childish game of make-believe of "saint and martyr," one finds—as perhaps in all children's games of make-believe—an intense work of symbolizing an absence of meaning. However, the passage's final sentence suggests an abandonment of the marking process just as she has begun. Because she can find no one with whom to share her signifying work, she in fact puts the stigmatized slip away, but it soon reappears to participate in

the marking of another hole.

“Un día,” she recalls, “le amarré un lacito e hice con él bolsa de vagabunda para coleccionar piedritas del patio de la casa de al lado” (63). Her use of the pebbles is significant. First, she uses them as tokens, that is, place markers, representatives of *bodies* on the board of “Chutes and Ladders.” Next she uses them in a game that she plays with her sisters in which they create kingdoms for themselves: “hacíamos en el piso o en el jardín mapas de tierras inexistentes, en el centro de los cuales nos coronábamos, en fastuosas ceremonias, reinas del país que delimitaban” (67). The pebbles function here as marking boundaries, of establishing inside and outside and thus creating a new realm. More significantly, during the crowning ceremony, the girl, wearing the stigmatized slip as a royal train, sits on a chair, placed on the bed from where she “contemplaba los límites blancos de mi territorio [...] bordeando la cama con las piedritas trazaban una *o* deforme” (68). The logic underpinning this use of the pebbles, contiguously (metonymically) displaced onto it from the stigmatized slip, is one in which an absence, a hole is continuously attempted to be given form, to be given a place in the realm of what does signify—to be clear: not to efface the absence but to signal it.

So how does this help us to understand the undecidability of the narrator’s death? If the girl is in the process of producing holes to mark the inadequacy of the signifier in relation to her bodily experience, then how do these holes function in relation to her death? The answer lies in the last use of the pebbles. The narrator explains:

antes de dormirme reacomodé algunas piedritas que se habían movido de su cerco.

Cuando cerré los ojos en el centro del territorio bordeado por las piedras, noté el silencio que me rodeaba [...]: no escuchaba a los mayores que todavía deambulaban por la casa y no escuchaba tampoco los ruidos que precediendo los pasos resonaban en la enorme

campana de la noche... En el centro del territorio inventado por casualidad en un juego, lograba escapar (¡por fin!) a la oscuridad dolorosa que terminaría por rodearme. (68)

The holes she creates provide a means of escaping death, figured here as “la oscuridad dolorosa.”

The holes signal a space where her persecutors, so many manifestations of the invasive jouissance of the Other, are held at bay. In fact, while she is occupied in fashioning these holes, the persecutors disappear from the text. They make their reentry here. So why do the holes eventually fail to protect her from death? In short, they fail because she stops producing them. In the novel this cessation of hole producing coincides with the girl’s abandonment of playing make-believe. Her last game of make-believe concerns the protective pebbles. While away on vacation, the pebbles are thrown out and when she goes to collect more, she finds that they have been removed during a remodeling project. She tries to recreate the protective circle around her bed with other objects but nothing works. One day she discovers that her grandmother’s armoire has the power to bring images to life, so she draws pictures of the pebbles and places them in the armoire. Having collected the pebbles made by the armoire, she places them around her bed that night only to discover that they do not protect her from the nocturnal noises that hound her. The narrator explains what this teaches her: “Comprendí entonces que las cosas no siempre son lo que parecen, que sería fácil recuperar lo que se ve et imposible recuperarlo en toda su sustancia” (112). The girl gives a telling formulation of the limits of symbols, of one thing standing for another—a mechanism that make-believe so unabashedly exploits. Confronted with the symbolic’s inability to recuperate all the substance of a thing, the girl abandons her attempt to symbolize the hole, the trace of the immaterial flesh which insists in her modern body. Instead, what her death demonstrates is that the organism itself comes to make up for the insufficiency of the symbolic. With her very body, she produces an absence that the symbolic could not entirely

recuperate.

If her death blurs the distinction between the literal and the symbolic and makes her body readable as both organism and symbol, it is because the hole in the symbolic becomes an organism, simultaneously undercutting its status as mere organism, making of it at the same time a symbol. In this way, the text demonstrates that the problem it stages, which *visibly* appears to be about a girl's accession to "womanhood"—to which I will return momentarily—is "in all its substance" about the loss of the organism through its capture in the symbolic. Hence her death is the trace of that eventual agreeable pain which first signaled to her that bodies are not all they seem. It becomes the literal figuration of the body's non-organic status. The night of her death, she is afraid of everything—everything is menacing: the curtains become wild animals, the floor becomes a sea, the light only serves to designate her as the enemy to be attacked. When her pursuers do show up, they are in her feet, causing her to run until she appears to lose consciousness. When she opens her eyes, she's in front of the gate leading to the street. At which point she smells something...

Creí percibir un olor a humo, un aire denso, lleno de pequeñas partículas carbonizadas, inflamados acaso, porque se clavaban en mi cuerpo con crueldad. Me ardía respirar.

Intenté abrir la puerta que daba a la calle pero no pude, era más fuerte que yo. Ahí estaban los perseguidores, los oía respirar junto a mí. Sentí que no iban a acosarme más y, en lugar del alivio, mi cuerpo dejó de pesar sobre la tierra: mi cuerpo no pesaba: mi cuerpo tendía hacia arriba, obediente de otra gravitación. (160)

Her burning body repeats her initial subjectivization by the event. But how will she respond to the immaterial flesh it signals without recourse to the symbolic? With her body, which becomes weightless. It is not her pursuers who render her body thus; without the support of the symbolic,

another logic imposes itself on the body, figured here as another gravitation that literally supports it. Immediately, the girl attempts to reground herself. In a scene that becomes insistently hallucinatory and surrealist, she spies a hole in the garden in which she sees “un corazón palpitando bajo la tierra, un corazón parecido al de la rana pero de sobra mayor” (160). She grabs hold of it which causes her pursuers to retreat and her body to take on weight. It fills “de peso al contacto con el tibio corazón que me había donado la tierra para detenerme: un corazón tibio, seco como un objeto de piel o de madera, suave pero firme. Palpitaba. Lo sujetaba con fuerza” (161). The heart recalls Juanita’s hand, described as wood when it is pierced by the embroidery needle, but it also evokes the image of the Sacred Heart of Christ. We are once again in the world of Catholic iconography (mingled with a science class experience of dissecting a frog recalled in the episode where she produces the drawing LITTLE NAILS), which again does not prevent her from having a “body”—here it is the only thing serving to keep her grounded in the world of bodies.

At this moment, she feels her underwear become wet; then she feels her thighs wet with a hot liquid; she looks down at her shoes to see them covered in blood and understands that this is the same liquid she has been feeling. She at first wonders what has broken inside her but decides that the blood has been produced by the heart she is holding, so she lets it go, causing the other gravitation to once again take over her body: “Mi cuerpo entonces, sin mayor defensa, ya sin peso, no podía permanecer ni un momento mas y subió, subió, subió, acompañada por los que siempre me habían perseguido” (161). Thus is described her death scene. With such a scene, it is easy to see why the novel is read as an indictment of “woman” in the social scene where the girl is situated, namely, patriarchal mid-century Mexico: becoming a woman is equal to dying (because there is no symbolic space for her as subject, i.e., no other identity than mother).

Through dying at the moment of her menarche, she rejects all that the menstruating body entails in such a social situation. Yet, according to the text, she does not die due to her menarche: she dies after letting go of the only thing that tethers her to the world, i.e., the heart, because she *mistakes* it for the cause of the blood staining her shoes. The text certainly wants to make a connection between her death and the arrival of her menses, to suggest that to become a woman is to become an absence, even to be confined to hell. But “woman” in this biological sense comes to supplement the drama being played out between her excessive flesh and the symbolic. Even as “woman” is woven into the tissue of the text at this moment, “her” unexpected appearance is coincidental to the cause of the girl’s disappearance. In this, the text stages a coincidental relation between the state of being a biological woman and the experience of a body unanchored by the symbolic, but it does not stage a cause and effect relation between the two. Or, to be more precise, it stages that a cause/effect relation is established only by a misreading. As in the novel’s final sentence, here another scene of reading the girl’s organism takes place, but it is not read *as* an organism; her menarchal blood is misread as the product of a symbolic object. In one sense, the girl dies because she attributes symbolic causes to an organic event—a cause and effect sequence that will subsequently baffle the doctor who can find no organic cause for her death. The girl’s mistake, moreover, serves as a cautionary tale for the reader of the novel. He is cautioned against mistaking the menarchal stain for the scene’s focus lest he too fail to recognize that the real problem facing the girl is a body that insists beyond the anchoring effects of the symbolic. Her death marks an absence in the symbolic, an absence that itself points to the feminine “flesh,” not the female body.

Form Inside Non-Form: *The Body of the Absent Other*

But if her death makes a symbolic absence literal, if the organism can come to speak, as it

were, where the symbolic fails, why then does the dead narrator herself speak? Why does the signifying body need to be supplemented with a speaker? What is the function of the narrative framing wherein the organism's "ghost" returns to speak? As we saw earlier, the author conceives of the narrator's position as one of being in hell, struggling to find a body whereby she might reenter the world of the living. The narrator herself tells us that through her story, she is trying to show that she has "forma dentro de la no-forma" (132). Hence, the narrative itself serves a purpose in establishing another body beyond the organism, or, a new form once the old idiom of form has been surpassed.

The narrator begins her story by addressing an unidentified "tú" who, in fact, is not present but who, by force of her insisting, will appear. This absent "you" who will receive her address makes possible an enquiry which she describes as an attempt "comprender que, si en esta oscuridad no hay límites externos, tal vez sí los haya dentro de las tinieblas que la conforman" (132). In other words, through speaking, which structurally requires an addressee, limits might be found to the death that rises beyond life in the phallic signifier. By calling forth this addressee, she makes possible the speech wherein her story unfolds. As she tellingly puts it: "No imaginé, al decidirme a contarles esto y a inventarlos a ustedes para que fuera posible hablar, *para que teniendo interlocutor tuviera yo palabras*, la dicha que mis recuerdos me iban a regalar" [emphasis mine] (64). In this way, the narrator's strategy is ultimately a recommencement of her fidelity to the event, but it is one that puts her in a relation to the barred Other (A) through the defiles of language (S). The novel gives us the notion of feminine jouissance (S(A)) as an experience that occurs in the process of narration as it gives us the notion of narration as truth procedure. In giving herself form now that she is without form, the narrator shows that she continues *as* the flesh in excess of the organism and that she continues in her

attempts to find a means of signifying this formless flesh. Her continuation, her fidelity occurs now from a different position, one beyond the world of bodies as they exist under the phallic function, a move which retroactively remarks her death as a traversal. If she had decided not to speak, if her death had been recounted by someone else, then the novel would read simply as an indictment of her social situation because her story would end with her death; but because *she* speaks her death and beyond it, the novel stages a subjectivity that persists beyond the social thereby situating the locus of the drama in this subjective “beyond” space. Her speech resignifies her death as the mark of her move beyond hysteria to femininity proper.

Because her death makes possible a speech that is addressed to an absent Other, it signals more than the loss of the organism; it signals a falling away of the Other of seduction which covers over the absent Other of the address. In this, death becomes a means of marking what Lacan calls in Seminar XI the traversal of the fantasy. Lacan evokes the term in relation to the end of analysis when the “plan de l’identification” is crossed (245) and the subject assumes his own desire—notably by moving beyond the transference which posits the analyst as the subject supposed to know. Traversing the fantasy entails a loss of the Other supposed to know and leaves the subject to assume responsibility for his own actions. In this regard, the novel offers an interesting passage. In one of the few asides the narrator makes about her current situation, she remarks:

no soy la que fui de niña. Soy la que era, eso si, soy o creo ser la misma desde el día en que nací hasta hoy, pero no tengo los mismos ojos. A mí misma me he impuesto la obscena tarea de deformarme, de quitarme la facultad de abrazar, de arrancarme las formas que ocultan un cuerpo. (98)

The narrator surprisingly assigns to herself the responsibility for her current situation. No longer

does she see things as she once did; her “different eyes” do not see her persecutors as responsible for her death. The narrator also avows that the fear that reigned over her girlhood disappears in the pleasure of narrating her memories. She affirms:

No mentí cuando les aseguré que era placentero recurrir a los recuerdos. [...] [E]n lugar de recordar podría fantasear, imaginar recuerdos, falsear imágenes y sucesos. No lo he hecho así, cuanto les he dicho me ocurrió, fue real: no he inventado una sola palabra, ha descrito tratando de apegarme lo más posible a los hechos. [...] Mas no tendría para mí objeto imaginar. O venzo el miedo que siento (y disfruto el placer) al recordar y modular las palabras que describen mis recuerdos, o me callo. Para qué las fantasías, para qué las imaginaciones, para qué las mentiras...No le veo sentido, no me daría placer alguno [...] No soy mas que un poquito de carne a quien los recuerdos le impiden pudrirse, llenarse de gusanos y de moscas hasta acabarse. (101-03)

The logic of the narrator’s affirmation is that speaking, recounting her memories has put her a new position whereby what once ruled over her she now vanquishes. The loss of the Other, then, becomes a source of pleasure. Furthermore, unlike the hysteric who remains within the complaint whose logic betrays a desire for an Other to take responsibility for the “poquito de carne” in excess of the phallically-guaranteed body, the narrator demonstrates that she has taken upon herself the task of answering for the remainder of flesh that she is.

In her essay “La féminité: D’une complicité à la perversion à une éthique de l’impossible,” psychoanalyst Lucie Cantin remarks that castration (the loss of satisfaction that language introduces into the speaking being) is difficult for the feminine subject to assume because she experiences language’s “incomplétude” and its “absence de fondement” (51). Why should she undergo a loss of satisfaction in submitting to something she knows to be arbitrary

and baseless? Thus, Cantin argues that the feminine assumption of castration involves more than an acceptance of the loss imposed by the signifier; it involves “l’exigence éthique de devoir passer par la parole, par le langage, en dépit de son défaut à dire le réel de l’expérience” (51). The experience of the defect in language and the excess that it introduces would be then only one part of the feminine experience, but it is ultimately one’s response to language that determines whether one accedes to femininity proper, a relation to S(A). Cantin argues that a decision to remain outside of language reveals itself in a feminine jouissance that “demeure silencieuse, jouissances multiples du corps, à la fois ravageante et fascinante que la littérature qualifie ‘d’englobante,’ ‘illimitée,’ ‘diffuse,’ ‘qui ne peut se dire’” while the feminine jouissance that appears on the other side of the passage through speech is a remainder that is “irréductible par le signifiant” (66). This remainder enjoins the subject to find a “une expression” for it that would not “faire l’économie du rapport à l’autre et à la parole” (66). In other words, contrary to what is often said about Lacan’s notion of it, feminine jouissance is not marked by silence or a specifically feminine experience that does not need words. Feminine jouissance beyond its hysterical manifestations and demands is an experience that *exceeds* the anchoring effects of language, entailing thus a necessary passage through the signifier. Feminine jouissance is not forbidden or censored by a socially determined symbolic but is rather the waste product of a symbolic that cannot, outside of the phallic signifier, tie enjoyment to a common meaning. The narrator of Boulosa’s novel, it seems to me, demonstrates this by speaking—speaking the truth, she assures us (102)—a truth which she does not reduce to the logic of common sense, but a truth that language in its limited capacity vis-à-vis her experience can signify. The strangeness, the supernatural elements of her story testify to these limits, but these same elements produce a narrative space wherein we might read the truth that has animated her: she became a woman the

moment she lost her body.

CHAPTER 3

L'AMANT: ON THE LIMITS OF SEX

The sexual relation preoccupies Duras's work: even during her most politically engaged period (between the war and '68), her work resolutely persists in a treatment of sexual desire between men and women. The sexual relation in Duras, however, never appears as the great escape from solitude. Leslie Hill, in her book *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*, aptly describes the nature of the relations between the sexes in the Durassian œuvre:

These stories of incest, suicidal passion, male homosexuality, separation, or divorce all display a prolonged and deep-seated crisis affecting the inner logic of sexual relations... what Duras's texts describe, rather than a sequence of euphorically transgressive love idylls, is a series of sexual relations that seem to be like so many failures of sexual relation. (138)

Indeed, one has only to think of the sexual relation in Duras's better known works to see the functioning of an impasse in all her couples: the woman who ceaselessly searches for her errant sailor in *Le marin de Gibraltar*; the bored, bourgeois Anne in *Moderato cantabile* who feels nothing for her husband and who is similarly unmoved by her working class lover; the scarred Frenchwoman and the Japanese man in *Hiroshima, mon amour*; Lol who decides to watch her lover making love to another woman in *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein*.

Duras presents us with a body of work preoccupied by a failure that similarly preoccupied Freud and that he would articulate in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Lacan would later distill Freud's discovery in the dictum "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel." As much as they might come together in the sexual coupling, men and women never come together in the complimentary "we two make one" of the erotically amorous ideal. Duras's couples are marked

by an inability to become couples. What makes Duras's approach to the sexual relation of interest, however, is the place she gives to the girl. In the œuvre, the girl functions as the figure who introduces the impossibility of the traditional couple.

Of course the girl in *L'Amant* is Duras's most famous: after Nabokov's *Lolita*, she may be the most recognizable of Western literature's precocious girls, but the figure of the girl is a recurring one in the Durassian œuvre. In her exhaustive study of Duras's use of the childhood trope, *Poétique de l'enfance chez Marguerite Duras*, Anne Cousseau points out that "Duras obéit [...] à une stratégie de brouillage référentiel systématique qui révèle un refus absolu de délimiter l'enfance. [...] On ne sera pas étonné dès lors que l'âge du personnage enfantin puisse apparaître comme une donnée subjective et infiniment variable" (21). For Duras, her first three protagonists are all girls though all of them are older than fifteen. Maud, the principle character in her first book *Les Impudents*, is twenty; Françou, from Duras's second book *La Vie tranquille*, is 25; Suzanne, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, is 17. For each of these characters, it is a relation to a brother and/or mother that keeps them locked in a protracted girlhood. In these early narratives, crossing the family threshold through assuming her position as partner to her sexual other will finally allow the Durassian girl to grow up. In a broad sense, these first novels repeat a Freudian scenario of men serving to resolve Oedipal situations. Duras's first two novels, in fact, follow the nineteenth century plot of getting girls husbands. By the third novel, though, Duras abandons this convention.

Un barrage contre le Pacifique is particularly important in the Durassian œuvre because it is the first of the "autobiographical" Indochina cycle that will culminate in *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* after *L'Amant*; thirty-four years separate the first from the second book but *Un barrage* makes possible the astonishing retellings that follow, for it is in this novel, I would

argue, that Duras investigates and finds wanting the catalogue of possible coming of age narratives for the girl. In leaving behind the nineteenth century convention, she raises questions about what other stories can be told: how does a girl become a woman without getting married? outside of marriage, what purpose does a man serve for a girl? what does the story look like for a girl who does not marry? I would suggest that this is another writing of what MacCannell calls, in relation to *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, “narrative deficiency” (169). Specifically, it writes the deficiency of narratives for the girl in her relation to masculine figures. It may not be a coincidence that the year Duras begins this novel in which the teleology of marriage is left behind (i.e., 1947) is also the year when she divorces, never to marry again.

As we saw in the introduction, the Freudian girl must at some point embark upon a relation with her sexual other to come into femininity proper, and she does so with a specific goal in view. In Freud’s account, the girl must eventually turn to the father substitute, her husband, to fulfill her desire for the infant that will make up for the penis which she lacks. In the maternal desire addressed to her (non-paternal) sexual other, the Freudian woman finds a way to resolve her particular Oedipal situation (Cantin 61). Lacan, however, having rearticulated the theory of the feminine to index a subject position whose particularity lies in her relation to non-phallic enjoyment and who is therefore not wholly solicited by the allure of phallic objects (nor wholly satisfied by them), invites us to ask what exactly a feminine subject seeks in the encounter with her sexual other. If the child(=penis) is, in the end, a phallic response to a non-phallic demand, what other response could a girl be seeking in turning to the father and all the men that will follow after? Willy Apollon poses the question thus: “[W]hat use does a man serve in a woman’s relation to the enjoyment for which language renders all objects inadequate?” (“Four Seasons” 101). By extension, if we consider that the feminine subject has an ethic that is

proper to her, how can that ethic be upheld in a sexual relation which is a phallic endeavor?

Un barrage contre le Pacifique is the first of Duras's novels to overtly treat the story of her childhood. It takes place in colonial Indochina in the 1920s. The cast of characters, a mother, son, and daughter, live in desperate poverty just as Duras, her mother, and two brothers did. Like Duras's family⁶², the characters in her novel live on an isolated and failing rice plantation in colonial Indochina. Due to their poverty, the family have been excluded from polite society and have been left to scabble in their decadence. The novel gives particular attention to the daughter of the family—Suzanne—who has reached the age of sexual availability. Suzanne herself has caught the attention of a certain M. Jo who, though wealthy, is physically and morally repellent. M. Jo, who will later be remade into the Chinese lover in Duras's best known novel, appears to have been modeled on a real life character. The exact nature of their interaction remains unknown.⁶³

Through its concentration on Suzanne and her first encounters with adult sexuality, the work demonstrates its thematic preoccupations and gives us an entirely untraditional account of feminine coming of age. On first reading *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, one is struck by the absurdly desperate and yet poignant image of Suzanne who, in the hope of being picked up by a passing car, takes to sitting everyday on the side of the road near her family home—a narrative

⁶² Duras's real family name is Donnadieu. Duras, which she took on when she began to write professionally—is the town where her father owned a house. Several biographies have been written of Duras—Laure Adler's being the most well-known—but the most revealing, i.e., the one that departs the most from Duras's account of events, is perhaps Jean Vallier's two volume work *C'était Marguerite Duras*. One of the more interesting facts he unearths is that during her student days, Duras was exceptionally well-off, living off the money her mother earned from running a private school back in present day Ho Chi Minh City. Duras owned, for example, her own car and took far-flung road trips in it.

⁶³ A journal was discovered after the author's death in which the lover is named Leo. According to this earliest version of the story, Duras and the lover sleep together once shortly before she leaves the colony for France.

deficiency if ever there was one. Desperate to leave the familial scenario but with no means of doing so, she accepts the necessity of prostituting herself, but even this convention is a dead end:

Maintenant c'était comme si le bungalow avait été invisible, comme si elle-même, près du pont, avait été invisible: personne ne semblait remarquer qu'il y eût là un bungalow et là, plus près encore, une fille qui attendait. Alors, un jour, pendant que la mère dormait, Suzanne entra dans sa chambre et sortit de l'armoire le paquet des choses que lui avait données M. Jo. Elle en retira sa plus belle robe, [...] celle qu'elle avait mise quelquefois à la ville et dont Joseph disait que c'était une robe de putain. C'était une robe bleu vif qui se voyait de loin. [...] Et en enfilant cette robe, Suzanne comprit qu'elle faisait un acte d'une grande importance, peut-être le plus important qu'elle eût fait jusqu'ici. [...] Mais pas plus qu'avant les autos ne s'arrêtèrent devant cette fille à robe bleue, à robe de putain. Suzanne essaya pendant trois jours puis, le soir du troisième jour, elle la jeta dans le rac.
(338-9)

Being in *no-man's* land (it should be noted that her brother has left and Suzanne is now alone with their mother), leaves the girl physically stranded, invisible and waiting. Furthermore, the point for Duras is not to create a no-man's land for the girl. She is not writing in the vein of a feminism that seeks to establish the self-sufficiency of the feminine spirit. No, Duras gives us a girl ready and willing to engage her sexual other but who is nonetheless entirely uninterpellated by the scenarios thus far offered. In other words, Duras writes a girl who sees in men something other than husband or father substitute.

The novel certainly stages the uselessness of conventional patriarchal narratives. Most obviously, the patriarch himself is useless—dead before the girl was of an age to remember him, he, in fact, figures nowhere for her or in the narrative. The family's misfortune, for example, is

presented as a result of the corrupt colonial administration and not of the father's death. With the absence of the father, Duras creates a post-patriarchal world for the girl and Suzanne's story must be understood in those terms. She is not the orphaned girl of the nineteenth century; instead, she figures the fatherless girl of postmodernity's single mothers. Suitably, the main man in Suzanne's life is her brother, Joseph, who could ostensibly serve as a father substitute, but is himself unwilling or unable to perpetuate paternal functions. The two men who present themselves as father substitutes in the form of a possible marriage partner or a rich "benefactor" also prove to be useless to the girl. The prospect of being the kept wife of a dependable husband or the kept mistress of an adoring lover does nothing to elicit the girl's desire; in fact, the pecuniary basis of the two men's courtship functions as the recognized symbol of her lack of desire. About M. Jo, the elegant, Parisian-educated son of a rich planter who will become the Chinese lover of *L'Amant*, Duras writes:

C'est lorsqu'il fut certain que Suzanne ne s'intéresserait jamais à sa seule personne qu'il essaya de jouer de sa fortune et des facilités qu'elle lui donnait, la première de ces facilités étant évidemment, pour lui, d'ouvrir dans leur monde prisonnier la brèche sonore, libératrice, d'un phonographe neuf. (187)

Similarly, after Suzanne refuses the marriage proposal of the English thread merchant, John Barner, we learn that he responds by offering thirty thousand francs to her mother (289). By pursuing her through their wealth, they fail to address her as subject. They both engage in "marketplace" seduction: Suzanne effectively is reduced to an object whose worth can be evaluated and exchanged; seduction would be a matter of evaluating that worth correctly.

The man with whom she does enter into a sexual relation, Jean Agosti, would appear as well to play on her dire circumstances: the sex act would appear to be contingent on the selling

of M. Jo's diamond (342, 350). However, the verbal exchanges which lead up to the sex act suggest the functioning of non-market forces in Suzanne's decision to accept this suitor and not the others. First, it should be noted that Jean shows up after Suzanne has thrown her "robe de putain" into the ditch thereby giving up on the idea of prostituting herself; at this point then, the girl has exhausted all possible relations with men except one based solely on her desire. As M. Jo had recognized early in the novel, Jean, who is like Joseph, is her kind of guy (193). Indeed, Joseph's absence is not inconsequential in Suzanne's acceptance of Jean: Joseph's abandonment of the family forces Suzanne to own her desire and to leave behind the family romance (ergo the waiting on the side of the road for someone to take her away); at the same time, it is exactly Jean's resemblance to Joseph that first arouses her desire. "Elle le regardait avec curiosité," writes Duras, "On aurait peut-être pu dire qu'il ressemblait à Joseph" (340).

But Duras does not leave the girl there; having encountered her sexual other on her own, the girl is not spellbound by the pleasure that the relation offers. What she wanted, she got: "Elle se sentait sereine, d'une intelligence nouvelle. [...Elle] désapprit enfin l'attente imbécile des autos des chasseurs, les rêves vides" (361-2). This newfound intelligence, this awakening from empty dreams is not, however, without the help of her brother. Joseph is a character who warrants some attention for he is an anomaly in the Durassian family romance. In *L'Amant* (in its sequel and in Duras's real family), there are two brothers: the beloved gentle, younger one and the sadistic, hated older one. In *Un barrage* the two are one in the person of Joseph. As a result, he presents as fully developed and complex (if not more) a character as the girl; the story is as much his as it is hers. In the economy of the Indochina cycle, though, this brother's presence leaves no place for the lover and dominates the girl's story. The family's introduction to M. Jo at the beginning of *Un barrage* illustrates the effect the brother has on the girl. Joseph is the first to

pronounce an opinion on him: “Merde, quelle bagnole [...]. Il ajouta : Pour le reste, c’est un singe” (173). Suzanne dutifully takes her cue; when M. Jo proposes to drive her home in the car that Joseph so much admires, his invitation elicits an echo from Suzanne of her brother’s judgment: “C’était un homme propre et soigné. S’il était laid, son auto, elle, était admirable.— Peut-être que Joseph pourrait la conduire ?” (184). The elegant Léon-Bollée limousine that will remove her from the brother’s domination in *The Lover* serves here as a symbol of the girl’s dependency on him, for even as she finds reasons to like M. Jo, she reduces him to a monkey with an expensive car as her brother before her. Equally, during this first encounter between M. Jo and the family when he joins them at their table in the local bar, his presence is left unremarked by Suzanne due to the brother’s:

[M. Jo] n’avait pas encore pris garde au frère, pas encore. Il remarquait seulement que Suzanne, elle n’avait d’yeux que pour ce frère qui se contentait de fixer soit ses dents, soit la piste d’un air morne et furieux. [...] Elle se sentait très près de Joseph, toujours, devant un tiers, et surtout quand il était aussi visiblement emmerdé que ce soir. (176)

If he functions for Suzanne as an ego ideal, he tries not to be an obstacle to the girl assuming her own subject position—he protects it, supports it, allows it to come into being even as she prefers to stay locked in an identificatory relation whereby he does all the enjoying. It is the brother who proclaims to the mother: “Elle peut avoir qui elle veut. Autrefois je le croyais pas mais maintenant j’en suis sûr. Faut plus t’en faire pour elle. [...] Elle sait y faire. Qui elle veut et quand elle. [...] Suffit qu’elle veuille” (243-4). Overhearing these words, Suzanne stores them away until her encounter with Jean at which point she remembers that it “suffisait de vouloir.” Furthermore, it is the brother who supports her in her autonomy when at the end of the novel Suzanne leaves her childhood home though her lover has invited her to stay. Her future is

unknown, but her possibilities are hopeful: “Ça n’a pas d’importance qu’elle soit avec moi ou un autre, pour le moment,” says her lover to which her brother responds, “Je crois que ça n’a pas tellement d’importance, elle n’a qu’à décider” (366). Men seem to have lost their traditional purpose for the Durassian girl by the end of *Un Barrage*. How she will approach them and to what purpose are as yet unknown but now it is she who will decide.

After *Un Barrage* and before *L’Amant*, the girl remains a privileged figure for Duras. Having disassociated her from the Oedipal romance and its conventional expectations, the girl becomes narratively and thematically more problematic than ever. When she resurfaces in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), she is faced with the narrative void that Duras has created for her, which produces a crisis. Duras writes a novel deeply cynical about the impossible relation between the sexes and finds that the only elegant way to respond to that impossibility is the solitary enjoyment of the voyeur. I read in *Lol V. Stein* a desperate attempt to imagine something new in the relation between men and women by asking what happens when a woman no longer wants to be the object of a man’s desire (the embodiment of the *objet a* which elicits his phallic enjoyment). Lol wants to enjoy her men but not in the fantasy that structures the sexual relation. The attempt leaves Lol in a solipsistic space, silent and waiting. This seems a negative take on Suzanne’s “elle n’a qu’à décider.” By *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969), Duras imagines something new for the girl: in the character of Alissa, she is brought back into the social circle but this time both as its weakest link and its motivating factor. Considered mad but not like Lol, Alissa is married but marriage is figured here as a non-proprietary relation in which her husband succeeds in loving her without reducing her to simply an object of his desire.

If the girl functions then as the figure who breaks the traditional narratives about couples and becomes the catalyst for writing other relations of desire between men and women in the

Durassian oeuvre, we do well to ask why the girl has this function. Why should the girl appear where the couple fails? *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* gives us to understand it is because the girl desires something else (which for the moment remains nameless), but then why does Duras so dramatically rewrite her story in *L'Amant*? Whereas in the initial recounting the girl's first sexual experience is a chance occurrence whose biggest impact is to relieve the girl of childish dreams (fed in the novel by Hollywood films at her local cinema and piqued by the consuming affair that her brother has with a married woman⁶⁴) about what occurs between men and women, in the retelling her first sexual encounter becomes a passionate affair that emotionally cripples the lover and socially ostracizes the girl. From the first telling to the second, sex moves from being inconsequential to consequential. Reading the two novels leaves one wondering how sex can be both.

If Duras's body of work is primarily understood as one that stages the impossibility of desire, a desire indexed by the traditional couple, and if the girl is positioned in Duras's work as the narrative figure who precipitates a continual restaging of this impossible desire, then Duras's work appears as a sequence in which the girl is the cause of writing. The highly autobiographical nature of much of her work attests to the formative effects of her childhood. But what exactly does the girl/Duras experience that will find itself reiterated through dozens of books, even when they have nothing to do with the girl?

Duras herself identifies the cause of her writing as a woman she saw a few times as a girl of ten.⁶⁵ In an interview with Michelle Porte from 1976 published in *Les lieux de Marguerite*

⁶⁴ The woman has many of the traits of the Anne-Marie Stretter, whom we will discuss shortly. She can be considered the first appearance of this feminine figure in Duras's work.

⁶⁵ Duras gives this age in *L'Amant*. She writes: "Cet isolement fait se lever le pur souvenir de la dame de Vinhlong. Elle venait, à ce moment-là, d'avoir trente-huit ans. Et dix ans alors l'enfant"

Duras, Duras recounts this story about the woman whose real name was Elizabeth Striedter, but whom Duras renames Anne-Marie Stretter and who will be a recurring character in her work:

M.D. : C'est peu après son arrivée qu'on a appris qu'un jeune homme s'était suicidé, par amour pour elle, par amour d'elle. Je me souviens du bouleversement que ça a provoqué en moi, je ne comprenais plus rien. Le choc, qui a été très fort, quand j'ai appris cette nouvelle, venait du fait que cette femme n'était pas apparemment une femme coquette, une femme mondaine ; elle avait quelque chose d'invisible, c'était le contraire d'une femme qui se remarque, elle était très silencieuse, on ne lui connaissait pas d'amis et elle se promenait toujours seule ou bien avec ses deux petites filles comme dans le livre, *Le vice-consul*. Et puis tout à coup on a appris cette nouvelle. Si vous voulez, elle a incarné pour moi longtemps une sorte de double pouvoir, un pouvoir de mort et un pouvoir quotidien. Elle élevait des enfants, elle était la femme de l'administrateur général, elle jouait au tennis, elle recevait, elle se promenait, etc. Et puis elle recelait en elle ce pouvoir de mort, de prodiguer la mort, de la provoquer. Quelquefois je me dis que j'ai écrit à cause d'elle.

M.P. : Dans *India-Song*, c'est votre fascination qu'on subit ? [*India Song* is a work in which Anne-Marie Stretter appears as the principal character.]

M.D. : Ce qui est mise en scène, c'est ma fascination, l'amour que j'ai d'elle. Je me demande si l'amour que j'ai d'elle n'a pas toujours existé. Si le modèle parental ça n'a pas été elle, la mère de ces deux petites filles, Anne-Marie Stretter, non pas ma mère, voyez, que je trouvais trop folle, trop exubérante, et qui l'était d'ailleurs. C'était ce pouvoir secret. Il fallait receler un pouvoir secret pour avoir cette force, dans la vie. Je

(110). However, in an interview with Bernard Pivot, she gives the age at which she knew about Anne-Marie Stretter as eight.

pense que c'était ça, elle, Anne-Marie Stretter, le modèle parental pour moi, le modèle maternel, ou plutôt le modèle féminin ; elle ne m'apparaissait pas comme maternelle, elle était avant tout une femme adultère, voyez, non pas la mère des petites filles. (64-5)⁶⁶

While this excerpt most noticeably gives narrative form to Duras's discovery of femininity, it is a narrative at whose center appears a hole. From the discovery of the dead man to the identification with the adulterous woman, the two poles of this narrative circle around a

⁶⁶ Duras gives another version of the importance of Elizabeth Striedter and the suicide she provoked in an interview with Xavière Gauthier which appeared in *Marguerite Duras* (Éditions Albatros, 1975). She recounts:

Un jour l'administrateur général a changé. Il est arrivé avec sa femme. Ils s'appelaient peut-être Stretter. Je ne sais plus. Ils avaient deux filles. Elle, c'était une femme rousse complètement décolorée, qui se fardait pas, que ne *paraissait* pas. Si tu veux, l'être et le paraître, je l'ai vu, je l'ai ressenti là. J'ai appris très peu de temps après leur arrivée à Vinhlong qu'un jeune homme venait de se suicider par amour pour elle. Cette femme invisible, tu vois, qui ne se remarquait pas et qui, moi, m'attirait à cause de cette espèce de décoloration de la figure, des yeux, eh bien! j'ai appris qu'elle avait un pouvoir comme un pouvoir de mort, très caché, très recelé et je me souviens du choc extraordinaire que cela a été le suicide de ce jeune homme. [...]

En tout cas, c'est comme la scène primitive dont parle Freud. C'est peut-être ma scène primitive, le jour où j'ai appris la mort du jeune homme. Tu sais, c'était une mère, sage, raisonnable, et ces deux petites filles toujours en blanc, c'était ses enfants, et cet homme, ce mari, était un père—moi je n'avais pas eu de père, et ma mère vivait comme une nonne—c'était la mère des petites filles qui avaient mon âge qui possédait ce corps doué de pouvoir de mort. Il y avait des réceptions, tout ça était très régulier, en ordre, le tennis, le parc, le Mékong, les sorties, le tour d'inspection chaque soir, le cercle européen, si triste, au bord du Mékong.... Tout d'un coup, dans cette espèce d'univers parfait et pour moi, comment dirai-je, immobilisé—l'accident—l'accident: le suicide par amour de cette femme—le jeune homme qui se tue pour elle. [...] Pour que ça m'ait fait un choc tel, tu comprends, je me dis que ça devait me concerner, que ça réapparaisse, quarante, cinquante ans après, c'est que ça devait me concerner de très, très près. [...]

A côté de ce faste colonial qu'il y avait autour de moi, très affirmé, très apparent, ce pouvoir de femme n'était pas apparent ; il était inattendu, il a explosé comme ça, comme une bombe mais silencieuse tu vois. Cet accident ne relevait de rien, d'aucune classe, il était naturel. Alors que c'étaient soit des automobiles de riches, soit des automobiles de pauvres, soit des enfants de riches, soit des enfants de pauvres, que tout était comme ça, classé, codifié, très clairement, tout d'un coup... et il y a eu cet accident dans cet ordre qui ne relevait de rien dans cette espèce d'ordonnement de la vie sociale blanche dans les postes, je crois que c'est ça qui m'a frappée. C'était pour moi bouleversant. (84-6)

(N.B.: This interview does not appear in the more well-known interviews that Gauthier conducted with Duras, published in the book entitled *Les parleuses* (English: *Woman to Woman*.)

break in the narrative sequence; seemingly *à propos* of nothing, she says: “Quelquefois je me dis que j’ai écrit à cause d’elle.” While one can easily extract this statement from Duras’s story, it is my contention that its irruption into the narrative and thus the logical disjunction between it and what precedes it is where the real story lies. That is, what is left out of in the sequence “she caused death” → “I have written”? Why should “she caused death” be the cause of writing?⁶⁷

To propose an answer to this question, I will consider Duras’s most famous novel *L’Amant* because I want to argue it is a writing of this gap. Such a move, however, must proceed through a closer examination of Duras’s account. As I have already mentioned, the story recounts a defining moment (indeed *the* defining moment) in her life as a woman, that is, from this moment on, she will know what it is to be a woman. So what is it that she now knows exactly? The first thing to notice is that the moment itself is marked by a failure of signification, a “je ne comprenais plus rien” that arrives at the end of a narrative. It is the narrative of the young man who has killed himself out of love for an entirely unremarkable woman. Why should this shock and *bouleverser* the young Duras? The suggestion seems to be that had the woman been “mondaine” and “coquette,” then the young man’s death would have made sense. What Duras runs up against then is the inadequacy of the phallic discourse to properly signify the object of desire. She learns that “what men want” cannot be made manifest in the seductive poses and trappings of the feminine masquerade. That is, the cultural signifiers of masculine desire (in this case, “mondaine” and “coquette”) which the feminine masquerade is supposed to express have been exposed as lacking. If this shocks the young girl, then it is because it throws her into a position of knowing that the Other (as signifying order where phallic enjoyment is

⁶⁷ To underline the apparent unmotivated nature of her comment, I should clarify that the interviews are not about writing as such. They concern photographs of places where the author has lived or about which she wrote.

maintained) does not know what a woman is. This leaves the girl on her own in the face of her sexual Other's desire. The young man's love for Elizabeth Striedter offers no point of identification from which Duras could imagine herself desirable. Thus, when Duras speaks of this woman as the feminine model, I think we also have to hear that what she models is that there is *no* model for femininity, or, perhaps more accurately, all models are false. This is one way to understand Lacan's statement "Il n'y a pas *La* femme." "La femme"—the one against which all others could be measured does not exist and any image or concept of woman that would purport to designate her is false.

But this is only one thing that she learns from the story of the young man's suicide. The story stages two enigmas: the young man's desire, yes, but also the enigma of the woman herself. In the repetition of the "on a appris cette nouvelle," Duras begins the story again. The news is no longer about the failure of "coquette" and "mondaine" to signify the Other's desire but is about the failure of motherhood, wifedom, and social standing to account for all of Elizabeth Striedter. As Duras puts it in another interview, the difference between the perfectly domesticated, *encadrée* woman that she presented and the power she had to cause death exposed Duras to the irreducibility of "l'être et le paraître" (see footnote 4). Duras's formulation of what troubles her about Elizabeth Striedter is suggestive of Lacan's claim that "woman" is not all in the phallic function and thus opens onto a beyond. Whereas the young man's love for E.S./A.M.S. exposes her to a lack in the order of meaning, the woman herself exposes Duras to an excess that has failed to be contained in woman's social designations. Duras situates the feminine model not where she has social meaning but where she fails to be reduced to these meanings, where she insists as irreducible to the social law that would contain femininity to socially (re)productive aims. It is striking that, for Duras, the feminine model is not a mother but "une femme adultère."

However, the nature of the adultery that concerns Duras is a something like an ontological one. The woman is not unfaithful to her husband so much as to the order of appearing; through her adultery, she reveals the inadequacy of the law of appearing to account for all of her being: i.e., woman is not all that she appears. Durassian femininity could be defined as remaining faithful to this “ontological duplicity.” To be feminine is to appear in the designated place, as it were, to take on the role of the feminine object but never *be* reducible to the appearance. To some extent, this is the problem that runs through many of Duras’s failed couples: women take up the position of the object but fail to *be* the object.

If she cannot *be* the object, if she can only inhabit that position, it is because she takes exception to this status—figured in Duras’s narrative as taking a lover, an illegal partner, one that is unrecognized on the social scene. I want to suggest that “une femme adultère” is a Durassian formulation of Lacan’s feminine position. If we return to the graph of sexuation, we see a graphic writing of woman as addressing two partners: the phallus (Φ) and the $S(\mathbf{A})$. Lacan himself envisions woman as split or divided in two through her relation to these two partners: “La femme a rapport à $S(\mathbf{A})$ et c’est en cela déjà qu’elle se dédouble, qu’elle n’est pas toute, puisque, d’autre part, elle peut avoir rapport avec Φ ” (*Encore* 75). By maintaining a relation to both partners, the feminine subject is adulterous. But why would she maintain a relation to a partner that renders her an object? At the beginning of the *Encore* seminar, Lacan remarks, “Rien ne distingue la femme comme être sexué, sinon justement le sexe” (13). There is nothing that makes a woman a woman, no essence, no standard. Thus, one reason she might take up a relation to the phallus is because it gives woman what she lacks: a signifier that would name her being. That is, in addressing herself to the phallus, the feminine subject seeks a symbolic existence as the Other sex. In a talk published in the *Écrits* as “Propos directifs pour un Congrès sur la

sexualité féminine,” Lacan argues that man functions to other woman for woman herself:

“L’altérité du sexe se dénature de cette aliénation [in the Other of the symbolic]. L’homme sert ici de relais pour que la femme devienne cet Autre pour elle-même, comme elle l’est pour lui”

(210). As sex is cut-off from any natural function, woman as distinct from man loses any being.

If she wants to take up a position in the sexual relation, she can only refer herself to her Other to receive the distinguishing mark that would make her the Other sex. Here the phallic partner is addressed as the Other supposed to know. In this address, it is exactly the excessive dimension of femininity that the subject seeks to get rid of. There is the demand that the phallic order make *La femme* exist.

This is not, however, the logic at work in Duras’s “une femme adultère.” A femme adultère maintains a relation to the phallus but does not address a demand for the signifier of her being. In this scenario, perhaps the phallus is approached to do exactly what it can: procure phallic, i.e., sexual enjoyment. As we will see, this certainly comes into play in *L’Amant*. But more importantly, the logic expressed in “une femme adultère” is that she can only appear *after* she has taken up a legally recognized relation, *after*, as the English expression goes, she has been “made an honest woman”—an expression that plays both on the legality connoted in “honest” and the quality it connotes of being real, genuine. There is a necessary inscription in the law before the illegal partner can come to be, or the lawful partner is the condition of possibility for the illegal “excessive” partner. In this, the “femme adultère” resembles the lady of courtly love poetry. As Tracy McNulty explains, the lady illustrates the mechanism of sublimation whereby, as Lacan puts it in *L’Éthique de la psychanalyse*, the object is raised to the dignity of the Thing by inhabiting the position of the object but erecting barriers that signal her irreducibility to the object. She writes:

its logic insists upon the commodification of woman precisely in order to reveal that woman is not reducible to this position, but rather animates its excess or remainder. For although woman is reduced to being nothing more than an object of exchange, the flip side of this objectification is her uncanny status as that “Thing” that feudal society is unable to account for, what has no place in its economy. [...] Thus although the poetry of courtly love comes to the Lady by following the traces of the object, it also insists upon her inadequation to it: whence the lady’s legendary inaccessibility, the index not only of her sublimity and interdiction, but of her occupying this position as a subject, possessed of a particular agency that both inheres in and resists her status as a possession or object of commerce. (*The Hostess* 225)

The lady appears not by refusing the objectifying discourse of feudal logic, by removing herself from its reductive economy; she appears exactly in taking up the position it assigns, but she inhabits it as a subject who demonstrates the inadequacy of the object economy to name her. Similarly, Duras’s “femme adultère” places herself within the legal economy of sexual difference—that is, where men and women *appear* to have a relation—in order to demonstrate its inadequacy to her.

The legal status of the adulterous woman also serves to highlight another problem, one that touches on more than the sexual (non)relation. Because Elizabeth Striedter is the wife of the general administrator, she belongs to the “univers parfait” of the white, European world of the colonial elite. Before the news of the young man’s death, E.S. functions for Duras as one more mechanism that guarantees the perfection, the completeness of this world from which she is excluded. After the news of her adultery, the perfection of the colonial administration is revealed to be incomplete; it becomes troubled by the unseen. The adulterous woman serves then as the

stain, the mark that mars the appearance of completeness that the colonial world has constructed. Like the Lady, whose subjectivity, “point[s] to another place, something off the map or outside the market, voicing what [the feudal] economy must overwrite or exclude in order to function” (*The Hostess* 225), Elizabeth Striedter’s power of death points to another scene excluded from the colonial day to day. In order for it to appear exactly as quotidian, it must exclude this power. Through the figure of Elizabeth Striedter, who she will reimagine as Anne-Marie Stretter in her work, Duras intimately links femininity to the excess that the status quo must always debar in order to establish itself as such.

For my purposes, it is more than the articulation of the feminine position in this story that is of interest. What is striking is that she articulates her discovery of it as an event to which she has remained faithful. If I qualify this story as recounting an event in the Badiouian sense, then it is because the telling signals a rupture that splits the girl’s understanding of the possible between a before and after. On one side of her “je ne comprenais plus rien” is the world where being and appearing are one (woman and the day-to-day are what they appear); on the other side, the two are split (woman/the day-to-day are not all that they appear). Her “je ne comprenais plus rien” is the lexical trace of a momentary supplement to the order of things whereby the count was revealed as unfounded. It signals a failure of what is to be. Within the narrative itself, Duras will go on to name the event “un pouvoir secret” and “un pouvoir de mort”; within her work, it will often bear the name “Anne-Marie Stretter.” In other words, this story recounts more than the source of her conception of femininity, it recounts her subjectivization by/to the truth that this femininity announces. We can see this more clearly in the second account of the event where she states:

c'est comme la scène primitive dont parle Freud. C'est peut-être ma scène primitive, le

jour où j'ai appris la mort du jeune homme. [...] Tout d'un coup, dans cette espèce d'univers parfait et pour moi, comment dirai-je, immobilisé—l'accident—l'accident: le suicide par amour de cette femme—le jeune homme qui se tue pour elle....Pour que ça m'ait fait un choc tel, tu comprends, je me dis que ça devait me concerner, que ça réapparaisse, quarante, cinquante ans après, c'est que ça devait me concerner de très, très près. (Gauthier 85)

More than just something that happened (or just to the young man), the death is an event that grabs hold of her, establishing itself as constitutive of her very self. Her evocation here of Freud's concept of the primal scene is telling for it seems to hit the conceptual mark of what Badiou wants to convey by the event. In "La vérité: Forçage et innomable," Badiou remarks that his concept of the event is "l'analogie en philosophie de ce que Freud a nommé, par exemple, la scène primitive" (199). In the essay, Badiou himself wants to draw on the unverifiable status of the primal scene, its nature of being subtracted from the analysand's memory (no one can say if it really happened or not); but even if the event is subtracted, it can be retroactively constructed because the truth that "machine le sujet⁶⁸" is the trace of its occurrence. It is this last characteristic of the primal scene that Duras wants to get at: there is a truth that "plots against" her sense of self-knowledge, a truth to which she is hostage. She is subject to this truth, even if she cannot say exactly what it is. The story of the shock she experiences upon hearing about the young man's suicide for an unremarkable woman serves as Duras's expression of her subjectivization by this truth. In other words, the story marks the event that makes Duras a feminine subject.

On my reading, the import of the narrative that Duras constructs around the news of the

⁶⁸ "Subject" is being used here to mean simply "individual."

young man's death and Elizabeth Striedter's power to provoke it can be located in its articulation of an evental surging forth of an unaccounted for mode of being that Duras affixes to femininity. She figures this being in three ways: 1) through the inadequacy of the phallic discourse to completely name what makes a woman desirable, 2) through the inadequacy of legal sexuality to contain woman, and 3) through the negation of the "univers parfait" caused by the woman's unseen power of death. With this in mind, I return to the question concerning the logical disjunction in the narrative: why should "she has the power to cause death" prompt "I have written"?

Duras's Sexual Experiment

I turn to *L'Amant* to answer this question exactly because, I would argue, it charts her decision to become a writer. In the decision to write, the novel suggests how a feminine ethic can be upheld in a sexual relation which is a phallic endeavor. In the experience with her lover, we will also see how it positions the girl as the figure who will cause all of Duras's couples to fail.

L'Amant appears towards the end of Duras's career and is a rewriting of the story told in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. Its status as a later work that *reworks* what has already been articulated suggests that what has already been said failed in some way. In the novel, Duras is quite explicit that she is doing something different in her treatment of the same:

Ce que je fais ici est différent, et pareil. Avant, j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements. (14)

I see here an expression of Duras's fidelity to the event. In his book *L'Éthique*, Badiou defines being faithful to an event as "une mise à l'épreuve" of the situation "« selon » l'événement"

(69). There is a sense here that everything in the situation must come to be rethought or remade from the point of view of the event or tested against what it introduces. Similarly, Duras's decision to dig up what had been buried in order to submit it to the truth that animates her writing is suggestive of a continuation of a process to better discern that truth.

We see from the opening scene of the book that the unspoken truth which animates its writing refers back to the event concerning Elizabeth Striedter, for it puts into play the inadequacy of phallic discourse to completely name what makes a woman desirable. In the beauty that the man finds in Duras's destroyed face and not where he is "supposed" to find it—in her youthful face which everyone says was beautiful—we are already faced with the absence that the unremarkable Elizabeth exposed. Once Duras takes us to the past, where she is fifteen and a half, she describes herself as already wise to this absence:

Je suis avertie déjà. Je sais quelque chose. Je sais que ce sont pas les vêtements qui font les femmes plus ou moins belles ni les soins de beauté, ni les prix des onguents, ni la rareté, le prix des atours. Je sais que le problème est ailleurs. Je ne sais pas où il est. Je sais seulement qu'il n'est pas là où les femmes croient. 26-7

If she has already been alerted to this problem, then it is because the young man's love for the neither *mondaine* nor *coquette* general administrator's wife has revealed it to her.

Similarly, the problem of woman being not all that she appears surfaces in the novel with her sudden discussion of two women, Marie-Claude Carpenter and Betty Fernandez. Their appearance in the narrative seems unwarranted. If the novel purports to be about, as the title suggests, the girl's first sexual experience, then their presence takes on the quality of a narrative aside, a literary rambling. Instead, the psychoanalytic practice of saying whatever comes to one's mind seems a more appropriate analogy, for her descriptions bear the mark of the problems

central to the text. Marie-Claude Carpenter is a rich American who holds, in her luxurious apartment, “at homes” that Duras frequented during the war. Duras spends a few pages describing her and her apartment and ends by saying:

Je la regardais beaucoup, presque tout le temps, elle en était gênée mais je ne pouvais pas m’empêcher. Je la regardais pour trouver, trouver qui c’était, Marie-Claude Carpenter. Pourquoi elle était là plutôt qu’ailleurs [...] pourquoi à ce point on ne savait rien d’elle, personne, rien, pourquoi, pourquoi dans ses yeux, très loin dedans, au fond de la vue, cette particule de mort, pourquoi? . (81-2)

Her description of Betty Fernandez—who though beautiful, extremely cultivated, and infinitely caring, turns out to be a Nazi collaborator—ends with a comparison to Marie-Claude Carpenter. She suddenly remarks: “Elle aussi, Betty Fernandez, elle regardait les rues vides de l’occupation allemande, elle regardait Paris, les squares des catalpas en fleurs comme cette autre femme, Marie-Claude Carpenter. Avait de même ses jours de réception” (85). In these descriptions, the references to Elizabeth Striedter are numerous (both pass their time staring vacantly out from their bourgeois homes, both give receptions), signaling that her presence functions in their irruption into the text. Like Elizabeth Striedter, they appear perfectly functioning in the every day world, but they trouble Duras with an inexplicable residue that their appearance does not reveal. They possess a “particule de mort.” Duras, in part, seems fascinated by their attempts to lodge this residue in the domestic world and ultimately sees their unrelenting hospitality (the carrying on with routine receptions during the war) as a self-mortifying act—just as Elizabeth Striedter appears to be neutralized by the incessant routines of the day-to-day. In this sense, these women present one version of the “femme adultère”: they embody the double power of the day-to-day and the power of death, or they are not all that they appear.

If they appear here in the story of the lover, it is because their version of the “femme adultère” is being *mise à l’épreuve* in the recommencement of the truth procedure that the novel stages, and it is found wanting. Duras claims that she too was like Betty Fernandez. Betty Fernandez is described as being exceptionally thoughtful, always concerned about the daily details of life: “elle se tenait là, toujours d’une amitié attentive, très fidèle et très tendre”—a description which is immediately followed by the revelation that she was a collaborator. Duras sees in her own participation in the French Communist Party an “équivalence [...] absolue, définitive.” The sameness lies in “la même pitié, le même appel au secours, la même débilité du jugement, la même superstition disons, qui consiste à croire à la solution politique du problème personnel” (85). The personal problem referenced here appears at first glance difficult to seize, but the text signals it in the sharp contrast between Betty’s daily life where she embodies the feminine ideal and her collaboration with the murderous Nazi regime: the feminine ideal is only maintained by an exclusion of all of the feminine subject. The social duties ascribed to woman (as opposed say to the citizen) are inadequate to her, leaving her with a remainder that she must confront on her own. In her rethinking the woman’s situation from the point of view of the event, Duras judges that politics cannot properly respond to this remainder. This is one way in which the novel writes the gap between “she causes death” and “I have written.” The “I have written” signals a disidentification, a rejection of the power of death that these women embody: they provoke death *but* I write. Writing is the only real response to the excess left over from the social order’s inability to adequately name woman.

The novel’s most forceful writing of the relation between what Duras calls the feminine power of death and writing occurs, of course, in the sexual relationship with the lover. And, in one sense, this is what the book wants to stage: the inadequacy of sex to respond to the feminine

remainder. The novel is much more forthcoming about Elizabeth Striedter's role in the girl's relation to her lover. Duras makes it plain that through her affair with the Chinese lover, she inhabits the same position as Elizabeth. She gives the added information that for a year, "la dame," as Duras names her here, could not be seen in polite company after the suicide. When Duras finds herself shunned by her classmates because of her affair, she says the "isolement fait se lever le pur souvenir de la dame de Vinhlong"—a memory which provokes the following comparison:

La même différence sépare la dame et la jeune fille au chapeau plat des autres gens du poste. De même que toutes les deux regardent les longues avenues des fleuves, de même elles sont. Isolées toutes les deux. Seules, des reines. Leur disgrâce va de soi. Toutes deux au discrédit vouées du fait de la nature de ce corps qu'elles ont, caressé par des amants, baisé par leurs bouches, livrées à l'infamie d'une jouissance à en mourir, disent-elles, à en mourir de cette mort mystérieuse des amants sans amour. C'est de cela qu'il est question, de cette humeur à mourir. Cela s'échappe d'elles, de leurs chambres, cette mort si forte qu'on en connaît le fait dans la ville entière, les postes de la brousse, les chefs-lieux, les réceptions, les bals ralentis des administrations générales. (111)

While her use of "la dame" harkens back to the lady of courtly love poetry, in Duras's rendering, the lady is not made inaccessible to men through the poetic address or through the challenges she sets her suitors. Rather, she is made inaccessible to the social itself—i.e., socially off limits—by, on the one hand, disgrace and, on the other, her body. Paradoxically, this disgrace dignifies her, rendering her queen-like because it is due to the pleasure of/taken in her body. Her body is of the kind to provoke a death-dealing pleasure. While there is something of a childish recasting of events at work here, the emphasis on "ce corps qu'elles ont" signals that the girl now knows

where the power of death resides. The power of death—here the French makes explicit the sexual connotations of death—comes from the body.

Does this however solve the problems to which Elizabeth Striedter exposes her? Namely, does the feminine body that provokes a death-dealing (i.e., orgasmic) pleasure fill in the absence of phallic discourse to name what makes a woman desirable? does it resolve the enigma of the woman's something more that the social fails to capture? does it return to the world a perfection that Elizabeth's power of death negated?

On the first count, the answer would seem to be yes. When she writes that she knows that women are mistaken to locate their seductiveness in the material signs of femininity—clothes, makeup, or refinement—she also defines where it can be located. As she puts it: “Il n’y avait pas à attirer le désir. Il était dans celle qui le provoquait ou il n’existait pas. Il était déjà là dès le premier regard ou bien il n’avait jamais existé. Il était l’intelligence immédiate du rapport de sexualité ou bien il n’était rien” (28). Duras imagines sexual desire as occurring outside the social discourse of sexuality. What makes a woman desirable is none of the things women think; instead, her desirability would seem to lie in being simply sexually available, in a body open to an encounter. While her thinking seems to participate in the pervert's logic—the pervert seeks to demonstrate that the social law has no purchase on the sexual drives—her claim speaks rather of the irreducibility of desire to any identifiable object. She demonstrates a certain understanding of the *objet a*—that little unknown something that sparks desire—that lovers locate in the body of their partners. It is not the feminine body as such that is the unnamed object of desire, but the feminine body appears by accepting to *receler* the object that animates phallic desire. Hence in her interview, Duras specifies that her mother could not be the feminine model because she lived like a nun.

By accepting to conceal the object—and not to externalize it by, say, wearing it—the girl in the novel displaces the problem of femininity from the realm of the social, which presumes to name woman and make her appear, to the realm of sexual desire. In this move, she enters into the heart of the problem posed by Elizabeth Striedter: if the social was not enough for her, was sex? Did the adulterous relation prove adequate to what was left unaddressed by her social being? It seems important here that the sexual relation is somehow illegal, unacceptable on the social scene. Duras wants to strip it of its imaginary moorings so that sex has no ulterior motives—there can be no hope of marriage, for example, or some other expression of the erotic fantasy “we two make one.” Sex for sex’s sake (“amants sans amour”) becomes a stage where woman might come to be not all that she appears. It is my argument that this reasoning helps to clarify some of the most enigmatic passages of the book.

To my knowledge, no one has yet commented on Duras’s use of the English word *experiment*, which she inserts in two passages in the text. When Duras appeared on Bernard Pivot’s *Apostrophes* to discuss *L’Amant* upon its publication, Pivot reads one of the passages. In his edition—apparently the first run—*experiment* does not appear; the text reads “les faits” in its place. Duras immediately informs him of the change, saying the English word has come to replace it. It is a pronouncement in the interview that begs to be interrogated, but, amusingly, Pivot bulldozers over it.⁶⁹ I myself have not seen the edition the first edition(s) where the “les faits” appears. The English translation appears to try to render both words by opting for “experience.” But I think this misses what the text is trying to convey because it signals the word’s specificity by italicizing it. The italics serve as a sort of flag. The word allows for a specificity of meaning that the French word *expérience* does not. *Expérience* means both

⁶⁹ The interview can be bought from the ina.fr website. The moment where she explains the change from “les faits” to “experiment” occurs around the seven minute mark.

“experience” and “experiment”—one relies on context to determine its meaning. Duras’s choice, then, of the English word signals a desire to get around this ambiguity in French. She insists on the active connotation that inheres in “experiment”: not the passive object that undergoes (simply experiences), she is rather the active subject who performs (experiments). The word moreover situates the action to be performed in a context of a search for knowledge. The word itself comes from the Latin *experiri* “to try, test.” I think we should hear this testing in her “experiment.”

But what, then, is she testing? The word’s first occurrence concludes a consideration of the narrator’s “visage prémonitoire” (15). She writes: “j’avais en moi la place du désir. J’avais à quinze ans le visage de la jouissance et je ne connaissais pas la jouissance. Ce visage se voyait très fort. [...] Tout a commencé de cette façon pour moi, par ce visage voyant, exténué, ces yeux cernés en avance sur le temps, l’*experiment*” (15-6). The second occurrence concludes a passage we have already considered:

Il n’y avait pas à attirer le désir. Il était dans celle qui le provoquait ou il n’existait pas. Il était déjà là dès le premier regard ou bien il n’avait jamais existé. Il était l’intelligence immédiate du rapport de sexualité ou bien il n’était rien. Cela, de même, je l’ai su avant l’*experiment*. (28)

The suggestion is that sex itself is the experiment by which a knowledge or a knowing that has no phenomenal referent can be tested.

On my reading, this knowing comes to her from the event, in which femininity is problematized. Sex, thus, takes on the quality of a sequence in her truth procedure. She appears to be verifying whether it is true that desire is caused by something unseen and not by what one is told. But sex also, as we have seen, places her in the same position as the adulterous lady whereby she can interrogate what that position offers. Is it true that “une jouissance à en mourir”

can respond to what the social leaves unaddressed, the unaccounted for being? Put another way, is it simply this *jouissance*, that of female sexuality, that has been excluded? Sex becomes an experiment where she can test the pleasure it offers, to take the measure of it.

The text signals the testing that occurs in the sexual act once more when Duras writes that she goes to the lover's room to "approfondir la connaissance de Dieu" (91). God serves here as a metaphor for sexual *jouissance*, or phallic *jouissance*, and the connotation is that this *jouissance* has a plenitude to it. However, the text is quite equivocal about God's power. At the beginning of the novel, Duras tells us that she is alcoholic because "[l]'alcool a rempli la fonction que Dieu n'a pas eue" (15). Similarly, the first time she and the lover lie in bed and engage in pillow talk, she remarks that their lovemaking has confirmed a sadness that she now knows will never leave her. This sadness is the "malheur que ma mère m'annonce depuis toujours quand elle hurle dans le désert de sa vie. [...] Elle crie qu'il ne faut rien attendre, jamais, ni d'une quelconque personne, ni d'un quelconque Etat, ni d'un quelconque Dieu" (57). If sexual *jouissance* is God-like, then sexual *jouissance* is, she learns, lacking. It somehow does not do what it is supposed to do and leaves the girl without expectations. In the lover's room where she goes to "approfondir la connaissance de Dieu," she increases her knowledge of what God cannot do. Towards the end of the affair, it would seem that she has taken the measure of God, and she exceeds him. Duras writes:

Il [the lover] discerne de moins en moins clairement les limites de ce corps, celui-ci n'est pas comme les autres, il n'est pas fini, dans la chambre il grandit encore, il est encore sans formes arrêtées, à tout instant en train de se faire, il n'est pas seulement là où il le voit, il est ailleurs aussi, il s'étend au-delà de la vue, vers le jeu, la mort, il est souple, il part tout entier dans la *jouissance* comme s'il était grand, en âge, il est sans malice, d'une

intelligence effrayante. (121)

While sexual jouissance seems able momentarily to make her body whole to the extent that her body can give itself “tout entier” over to pleasure, the net result of her sexual experience is that it has released the fixed boundaries of the body, revealing it to be without end. Sex gives her a body that extends beyond appearing—splitting her between appearing and a being that has not come under the limits of the phallic signifier.

The stakes, then, of the *experiment*, of the testing are much higher than they first appear. The test does not simply confirm the truth of her sexual knowingness, it also shows that even sex cannot make all of woman appear. The test brings into view a “something more” that the girl must find some other way to deal with.

Her final verdict comes at the end of the affair just before she takes the boat back to France. Returning one night to her pension after an evening with the Chinese lover, she thinks about waking her classmate, Hélène Lagonelle, but decides against it and then she thinks about her lover, who must be somewhere drinking with his chauffeur and she finds the thought of them unbearable because

Il semblerait qu'ils aient leur vie comblée, que ça leur vienne du dehors d'eux-mêmes. Il semblerait que je n'aie rien de pareil. La mère dit: celle-ci elle ne sera jamais contente de rien. Je crois que ma vie a commencé à se montrer à moi. Je crois que je sais déjà me le dire, j'ai vaguement envie de mourir. Ce mot, je ne le sépare déjà de ma vie. Je crois que j'ai vaguement envie d'être seule, de même je m'aperçois que je suis plus seule depuis que j'ai quitté l'enfance, la famille du Chasseur. Je vais écrire des livres. C'est ce que je vois au-delà de l'instant, dans le grand désert sous les traits duquel m'apparaît l'étendue de ma vie. (126)

Duras once again evokes the sadness that she experiences after the first sexual act—the one that her mother has foretold. Like her mother's, the girl's life is now a desert from which there is no issue. No Other will come to her aid—an indication that she has in Lacanian terms traversed the fantasy. Left alone now with what phallic jouissance was incapable of satisfying, she faces a decision: how to respond to this excess. Shall she give in to her desire to die? Will she continue though life be a desert? Yes, she will continue. She will write. Duras repeats exactly the logical disjunction expressed in the interview. Where the symbolic order appears to disappear, engulfed by the feminine excess, she courageously, faithfully refuses to give up on the symbolic. If “I write” appears as a non sequitur in these accounts, it is because no logic sustains it but a purely subjective decision to persevere. Writing then becomes an ethical response to the feminine excess. Writing will not rid her of this excess but support her in its vast desert where no Other can meet her.

Thus, if Elizabeth Stretter's power of death causes Duras to write, it is because Duras submits to a test her solution to the feminine excess and finds it to be inadequate to the truth that Duras perceives in the former's adultery and the death it provokes. The power of death, as Duras names this feminine excess that she perceives, is not a sexual one. It is instead something always unseen that prevents any attempt to bring it entirely into the realm of appearing, as Duras puts it. In Lacanian terms, it cannot be brought entirely into the phallic order. In Badiouian terms, it is a truth that knowledge cannot discern. But also because the power of death is not sexual, it reveals the inadequacy of “un quelconque Etat, d'un quelconque Dieu”—any attempt to establish an order from them can do so only at the exclusion of this excess.

If these are the consequences of the sexual relation and the enjoyment it offers, then we can see why it takes on such an importance in Duras's work. For Duras, it is through the sexual

encounter that the feminine excess comes into view. This is the experience that seems to be reappear through much of her work, even when the girl is not involved. Her work appears as a continual investigation of, as Lacan puts it, the feminine way of making the sexual relation fail (*Encore* 53-4). In the two works I have considered here, I suggested that sex moves from being inconsequential to consequential: whereas in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, sex is shown to be a necessary passage for the girl to rid her of empty dreams but otherwise appears to have little consequence, *L'Amant* shows sex to be a defining event for the girl. I would argue that *L'Amant* submits the “little consequence” to a more rigorous investigation from the point of view of the event and is finally able to discern just what sex can and cannot do. If it is inconsequential, then it is only to the extent that it leaves untouched “une tristesse,” “une envie de mourir.” But sex is consequential in leaving them untouched because they are the excess that causes her to write.

In *L'Amant*, Duras gives a new meaning to “une femme adultère.” She reveals that with every sexual partner she enjoys (and it should not be forgotten that she has no complaint about the enjoyment sex does give her), with each of these “legal” partners in the phallic order, she is unfaithful because each can only enjoy part of her. Each exposes her to the limits of sex and brings about a remainder that will force her to her lover, the one that does not fail her: writing.

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