IDENTITY OUT OF PLACE: FLAUBERT, BECKETT, GODARD, AND THE SUBJECT OF MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

Identity Out of Place seeks to develop a new way of thinking about the achievements of modernist literature and cinema, by looking at how modernist texts both problematize and reimagine identity. Engaging with understandings of modernism which emphasize its disidentifying or 'unselfing' qualities, I argue that these qualities can themselves only be understood as reopenings of identity as a question that is at stake in all human action and experience – at stake as intrinsically incomplete and out of place. The dissertation develops this account through detailed engagements with three significant works of French modernism which stage in the most exacting manner a problematization of identities and a questioning of the coherence of both self and world: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie* / *Endgame*, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie*.

Each of these three chapters develops the dissertation's overarching argument about modernism's problematization and redetermination of identity, through readings of Flaubert's *derealization* of the realist novel, in the context of his presentation of a woman's crisis of identity in the face of a social world that offers her only alienating roles to occupy (Chapter One); Beckett's meta-theatrical presentation of the performativity of the self and the debilitating interpersonal relationships taken on by individuals who cling to static identities in the face of a collapsing world (Chapter Two); and Godard's modernist assault on

predominant cinematic models of representing and narrating character, carried out through a discontinuous presentation of the life of a woman who is offered identity only in the form of sexual possession by men (Chapter Three). In the development of its account of self-relation as both constitutive for human experience and constitutively incomplete, the dissertation draws throughout on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work grounds self-relation in perception, as the primary form through which embodied human beings situate themselves in the world. It is precisely this capacity to situate oneself in the world that is radically put into question by the modernist texts I focus on, even as these texts reveal such an activity of self-situating self-relation to be at stake in even the most deprived of conditions.

The Conclusion further develops this approach to self-relation as instrinsically at stake in experience, through an engagement with a series of thinkers (including Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jacques Rancière, Michael Fried, and Robert Brandom) with regard to questions of the narrativity of identity. A mature form of personal life, I argue here, demands taking up a conscious relationship to the identities one holds in the world and for others, in recognition that who one is cannot be separated from one's worldly existence. A mature form of social life – held out as a possibility by the works studied in this dissertation, in their rendering of the antinomies of modern struggles for and against identity – is shown to be one which enables individuals in the cultivation of such forms of responsible self-relation, through an overcoming of the alienating conditions that place identity in opposition to life.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Conall Cash grew up in Melbourne, Australia, and began his undergraduate studies at the University of Melbourne, before moving to the United States and completing his BA with Honors in English Literature at Haverford College in 2008. He subsequently returned to Australia, where he completed an MA in Critical Theory at Monash University in 2012, and taught for several years at Monash and at Victoria University. He returned to the United States to commence an MA/PhD program in the Romance Studies department at Cornell University in Fall 2014. He received his MA from Cornell in 2017, and subsequently spent time living in Paris while conducting dissertation research, thanks to a SAGE Fellowship, a Chateaubriand Fellowship, and the Cornell-Paris 8 teaching exchange. He defended his doctoral dissertation in February 2022, and is currently Lecturer in French Studies (Melbourne Early Career Academic Fellow) at the University of Melbourne.

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This dissertation's attention to crises of identity and the struggle to live in an unresponsive and incoherent world is not a purely academic concern. It is offered in honour of the Emmas and the Nanas, the Clovs and the Carries, of those who have faced such crises, whose struggle to live is a struggle to change the world.

HUGO. Je suis dans le Parti pour m'oublier.
HOEDERER. Et tu te rappelles à chaque minute qu'il faut que tu t'oublies.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *Les mains sales*

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Introduction

Modernity, Modernism, and Identity

1. Modernity and the Subject of Decentring

The category of modernity has often been associated with the *decentring* of human experience and human perspectives upon the world. Immanuel Kant's infamous comparison of his own critical philosophy to the "Copernican revolution" at the origin of modern astronomy draws such a link between the attainment of a modern, critical form of thinking and a decentring of the human being's lived perspective. Kant's proposal that the objects of our experience "must conform to our cognition," rather than the other way around, is analogous, he suggests, to "the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest."[1] Kant's analogy suggests that a science only attains genuine knowledge once it engages in a self-conscious reflection upon human cognition's own involvement in that which science seeks to know. Copernicus thus points the way to genuine knowledge of the solar system by grasping the earthly observer's perspective as one which moves, rather than as an Archimedean point of perfectly true, static observation of celestial objects in their true state; while Kant's philosophy opens up the way to genuine knowledge of the objects of our experience by grasping them *as* objects of experience, as objects which must "conform to our cognition" in order to be experienced at all. Grasping our own cognition's determining role in the constitution of objects as we experience them thus

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110.

allows for a decentring of the human perspective, by determining *that* we perform an activity of centring our own perspective in our very taking of objects as objects, such that this centredness is not given or pre-subjectively 'true'. The decentring of the human subject's perspective through a reflection upon our own contribution to the constitution of the world as we experience it thus emerges as the only pathway to genuine knowledge, or what Kant calls science.

The ambiguity which the category of modernity has retained into our own time can be felt already in Kant's evocation of the Copernican revolution, that paradigmatically modern event: an ambiguity between, on the one hand, modernity as humanity's confident emergence from dogmatism and superstition into a genuinely scientific knowledge which marks a new authority of human beings over the world and ourselves; and on the other, modernity as the name for a deflation of human ideas of our own centrality and mastery over the world we inhabit, through the revelation of our condition as "moving" beings whose finitude and fragility do not allow us any detached or omniscient grasp of that which we seek to know. In recognising *that* objects must conform to our cognition in order to be objects of experience at all, Kant engages in a certain decentring of the uncritical desire for knowledge of things 'as they are' or 'in themselves.' But the rigorous ambiguity of Kant's proposition lies in its recognition that any decentring is itself a recentring of a kind, a reflection which permits the subject of this reflection to *grasp their own decentredness*. From here, a question that emerges for thinking about modernity and the self-reflexive capacity of 'modern' subjects is whether such critical self-reflection occasions a form of transcendence or mastery of human reason over the limiting conditions it characterises, or whether what it occasions is a deflationary account of human finitude and the hubris of reason. The post-Kantian situation to which contemporary humanistic thought remains bound is perpetually caught up by this

question of the stakes of a reflection upon our own finitude, and the question of *what* modernity follows from this reflection.

For some time, a predominant tendency within the humanities has been to favour what I am here calling the deflationary position. Such a deflationary position has recurrently been seen as the appropriate task of the humanities in their reckoning with the situated, decentred finitude of human thought and action. Contemporary fields such as posthumanism and animal studies engage in a critique or deconstruction of the "binary logic" they see as proper to efforts to grant any exceptional status to human reason, drawing on a broadly poststructuralist heritage.[2] The critique of such a conception of human exceptionality has further been shown to be tied to a critique of the heteronormative, patriarchal, racist and colonialist forms through which the human has been defined and delimited, such that opposition to these forms of epistemic violence, and the material violence that underlies them, has come to be linked to a deflation of the category of the human itself.[3] While another significant tendency within the contemporary humanities – that associated with speculative realism and object-oriented ontology – is avowedly anti-Kantian and opposed to the language of finitude, proclaiming philosophy's capacity to engage with reality beyond a "correlationist" concern for the limitations of human thought, it does so by renouncing philosophical attention to the human altogether.[4] These various fields are united in seeing a deflation of human reason as an essential task for the humanities – either by dwelling on human reason's finitude and false grandiosity, or by disregarding it as irrelevant to the true work of philosophical speculation.

[2] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), Chapter One, "Life Beyond The Self," 13-54. Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
[3] We may here consider the posthumanist feminism of Braidotti or of Donna Haraway; the anti-humanist queer theory of Leo Bersani or Lee Edelman; or the Afropessimist thought of Frank B. Wilderson.
[4] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2010). Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (RePress, 2011).

In the deflationary position they take up towards the human, these fields draw upon one possibility opened up by the Kantian framing of the modernity of thought as a decentring of the perspective of the human observer.

The argument to be developed in this dissertation also develops a critical perspective upon conceptions of human reason as a form of disembodied, detached mastery. But the deflationary position, which sees the decentring of the human perspective to be the simple and essential end or aim of critique, fails to think through the full force of this decentring. In a striking reprisal of Kant's infamous analogy, Sigmund Freud offers what I take to be an exemplary expression of this deflationary position:

> In the course of centuries the *naive* self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus, though something similar had already been asserted by Alexandrian science. The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors, though not without the most violent contemporary opposition. But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind.[5]

Like Kant, Freud seeks to situate his own critical project in relation to that of Copernican science and the decentring of the earth. But Freud here takes this analogy in a strictly deflationary direction: the lesson of the three historic "blows" to the ego, for Freud, is that of accepting that we cannot have the centred importance that we desire. The outcome of this insight is thus framed entirely negatively, as the revelation of an inconvenient truth that we will have to bear. Freud's framing of this problem of decentring offers no reflection upon his own intellectual endeavour as itself a human, worldly practice: he neglects to investigate the question that Kant's opening up of the Copernican analogy approaches in an ambiguous way,

[5] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 326.

which is the question of *who* is the subject of this decentring, or what kind of subject emerges from this self-criticism. In the picture he presents, science appears as something entirely separate from human life, which delivers messages from the realm of truth that human beings can only resist or begrudgingly accept; this neglects to think through the fact that the decentring is itself carried out by human thought, which thus seeks to ground itself in a new way through the decentring it performs.

It is this question of the *subject of decentring* that will be pursued throughout this dissertation, and which I argue is ultimately what is at stake in the question of modernity as a form of thought and a form of life. Who is this subject who puts themselves and their own perspective in question? What follows from this decentring of ourselves and our own living perspective? The dialectical demand opened up by thought's decentring of human perspectives is that of reflection upon thought's own capacity to perform this decentring: the modern confrontation with the finitude of our own perspective poses the question of who we are, as subjects capable of engaging in a reflection upon our own finite situatedness. The "blow" to fantasies of mastery is internally inflicted, and thus our capacity to both give and receive (and survive) this blow must tell us something about ourselves. Rather than culminating in an externally administered deflation that we must tolerate as if following a doctor's orders, the decentring of our own perspective itself expresses a *critical self-relation* that human beings (can) take up to our own life. If the attitude of mastery falsely imagines that gaining a certain self-knowledge grants us mastery over ourselves and a unique capacity to oversee the world, the deflationary position fails to reflect on the fact that the subject who receives the deflationary "blow" is also the one who inflicts it. In distinction from each of these positions, this dissertation will take up the question of what it is *to be* this subject

engaged in a critical self-relation, to be a subject who both puts one's own perspective and attitude in question and faces the question of how to live in light of this reflection.

2. The Critique and Redetermination of Identity

In framing the decentring of one's own spontaneous, living perspective as the expression of a critical self-relation, this dissertation stakes itself on a rethinking of the whole question of selfhood or identity, which has been engaged with critically by many of the traditions that inform the contemporary humanities. Whereas the broadly poststructuralist tradition drawn upon by contemporary fields such as those discussed above has persistently engaged in a critique or deconstruction of the very category of the self, my own approach, in considering the critical self-relation proper to every decentring, pursues the question of what form of selfhood or identity emerges from such reflection upon one's own decentred condition. On my reading, poststructuralism broadly speaking remains tied to the deflationary position evoked above, seeing as the essential task of thought the undermining of the self as an imaginary form through which the ego or "I" upholds the fantasy of its own centredness. In so doing, I argue, it neglects to take up the question of the critical self-relation at stake in the thinking of decentredness itself: it fails to reckon with the fact that the thought which renounces the self is itself the thought *of someone*, insofar as to think is necessarily to take oneself to be the subject of this thought. The question which such a decentring – such a reflection upon our decentred condition – elicits is that of what form of self-relation this problematisation of the self makes available; and not, as the deflationary position has it, the simple renunciation of selfhood or identity altogether.

The poststructuralist tradition's assault on the very category of the self can be understood in terms of a critique of the idea of an unmediated, primary self-relation. The critique of the attitude of mastery has been tied within this tradition to a valuation of otherness and disturbance over against that which recuperates such otherness to the sameness of the self. In the work of Jean-François Lyotard, this critique or deconstruction of self-presence is enacted through the opposition between the discursive and the figural. For Lyotard, while the history of thought has denigrated the figural in opposition to the dry rationality and clear meanings sought by discourse, a disturbing figurality continually reveals itself within discourse itself, undermining its claims to bear a simply communicative function. Discourse, as a purportedly "self-sufficien[t]" system of differences within which meaning is enclosed and reduced to an identifiable unity, seeks to subdue the "initial alterity" of figurality which it is in truth parasitic upon. Lyotard thus writes of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard* as a text which "radically deprives articulated language of its prosaic function of communication, revealing in it a power that exceeds it: …the power to figure, and not only to signify."[6] Since language bears the figural form of letters and sounds, its communicative function as the transparent expression of a thought is always under threat from within, defeated by its internal enemy, the "initial alterity" of the figural, as an unendingly creative force of association which differs from itself essentially, having no 'true' form or identity. For Lyotard, ethics is a matter of "taking the side of the figural," by "making it visible" as a "shattering" "disturbance" and "event" which no self is capable of comprehending or recuperating.[7]

[6] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse/Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 61.
[7] Ibid., 17-8. The opening section of *Discourse, Figure* is entitled "Le parti pris du figural."

The idea of an excessive and disturbing force which precedes the constitution of the self and interrupts its supposedly transparent contact with itself is found equally in the work of other poststructuralist thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, with his oppositions between the *lisible* ('readerly') and the *scriptible* ('writerly') domains of a text; *plaisir* as a reconfirmation of the self and *jouissance* as a shattering of this self in the experience of reading; and, most famously, *studium* and *punctum* as forms of engagement with photographs, the former referring to the communication of cultural knowledge, the latter to an element or detail which exceeds intentionality and rational understanding or communication.[8] Julia Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic domains of language can be understood similarly, with the former referring to a "code" or "system" which "holds" subjects in place, in the form of a "Cartesian" or "transcendental ego," while the latter refers to all that transgresses this unity of the ego. For Kristeva, this transgression of the self or ego is "the key moment in [linguistic] practice," bringing to the surface the pre-communicative "drive-governed bases of sound-production" which reveal a non-rationality beneath the purportedly self-knowing, self-transparent self.[9] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's influential notion of the rhizome also aims to undercut the dualisms of self and other, identity and non-identity, by proposing self-differentiation as intrinsic to development and to life, replacing an "arborescent" model of a search for roots with a rhizomatic model of a primary, unrooted "multiplicity," where every self is multiple and perpetually dividing into or forming "assemblages" with others.[10] Deleuze and Guattari further provide a paradigmatic expression

[8] Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).
[9] Julia Kristeva, "The System and the Speaking Subject," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, 24-33: 27; 29.
[10] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6-8.

of the ethic of a flight from the sameness and unity of the self with their central notion of the "line of flight."[11]

In contrast to the *dualistic* perspective offered by these various deflationary approaches – dualisms of self and other, sameness and disturbance, identity and disunity, which place ethical value upon the latter of these terms, even while this latter term remains dependent upon that which it 'disturbs' – this dissertation aims to pursue the *dialectical* question of the subject who emerges through critical reflection upon our decentredness and our finitude. The laudable aim of a critique of the attitude of mastery and the violence this attitude both entails and disavows has been linked to a critique of the self, with the latter understood as the fulcrum of this attitude of mastery, by rendering rationality complete, infinite, and transparent to itself in the form of a self-knowing subject who overlooks an inert, passive, and mindless world. But while this critique of mastery is vital, conflating this with a critique of the very category of the self leads to the incoherent position of explicitly renouncing what is implicitly reasserted in the act of critique itself, which relies, like every thought and attitude, on a self-conception in its very expression.

Thus, I will argue throughout this dissertation that the critique of the attitude of mastery to which the contemporary humanities are rightly committed can be accomplished only through the *redetermination*, rather than the *renunciation*, of identity. The non-mastery and non-finality of every identity does not undermine identity as a category of thought, but is precisely what constitutes it and makes it unavoidable as a question for critical thought to take up. The constitution of identity as *out of place* – as perpetually engaged in the activity or practice of situating itself in response to the surrounding world – signals both that identity

[11] Ibid., 9.

never attains the mastery of a final unity or transparency (since this 'full' identity would eradicate identity altogether, for it would obliterate the living and temporal condition that enables self-relation) and that it is ineradicable as a question for anyone who *takes themselves* to be doing anything. The decentring of human experience so central to understandings of modernity can thus be conceived in terms of this redetermination of identity in light of its perpetual displacement or out-of-placeness, this taking up of the question of identity through the revelation of its ungroundedness.

3. Merleau-Ponty: Self-Relation, Perception, Life

The thinker whose work I draw on throughout this dissertation to the end of developing my account of identity as both constitutive and perpetually out of place is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, who died suddenly in 1961, shortly before the transformations in French thought led by the poststructuralist generation evoked above, has seen a shift in reputation in the humanities in recent decades. While for some time understood within an existentialist and phenomenological paradigm said to have been surpassed by deconstruction and anti-humanism, Merleau-Ponty's attention to questions of embodiment, intersubjectivity, and nature has more recently led to a resurgence of interest in his work both in philosophy and in the broader humanities. In emphasising these aspects of his thought, contemporary readers have in various ways connected Merleau-Ponty's work to the project of decentring the self, rationality, and the human, in fields such as environmental philosophy, posthumanism, affect theory, and animal studies.[12] This engagement with Merleau-Ponty's

[12] The dislocation of Merleau-Ponty's thought from the existentialist paradigm was pioneered by Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Indiana University Press, 2004). On the philosophy of nature, see: Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009); David Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018). On animality and posthumanism: David B. Dillard-Wright, *The Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty* (Plymouth, UK, 2009); Astrida Neimanis,

thought beyond the existentialist paradigm has been vital both to demonstrating his work's pertinence to contemporary concerns, and to giving a greater account of the complexity of his *oeuvre*. But while salvaging his thought from a conventionally understood existentialism is crucial, I argue that an effort to read his work in terms of an undermining of the self, rationality, and the human is one-sided and limited in a different way. The attention to intersubjectivity and "intertwining," to embodiment, and to nature in Merleau-Ponty's thought does not amount to a renunciation of the distinctness of self-conscious life, or to a fantasy of "returning" to a life prior to human rationality.[13]

As I mean to bring out in my engagement with his thought throughout this dissertation, Merleau-Ponty is concerned throughout his work to think the specificity of a form of life which reflects upon its own contingency, animal nature, and finite life; far from abandoning the question of rationality in his attention to our embodied nature and the intertwining of individuals with each other and the natural and social worlds, his thought develops an account of rationality and self-consciousness as made available through a reflection upon these conditions of our life. As he writes, "The notions of Nature and Reason," when thought of as "separate principles," "mask a constantly experienced moment, the moment when an existence becomes aware of itself, grasps itself, and expresses its own meaning."[14] Merleau-Ponty's attention to the finitude and natural dependence of human

Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2016). On affect: Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martin Lloyd, "Philosophy and the 'Affective Turn'" (*Parrhesia* 13, 2011: 1-13). On the question of intertwining, intersubjectivity, and entanglement: Saige Walton, *Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

[13] On this notion of the 'return,' David Morris writes with respect to Merleau-Ponty's notion of radical reflection: "Phenomenological method would allow a return to this prescientific world, and this would allow a return to a world prior to knowledge of structures as scientific objects; this sort of return could reveal whether structures are just our constructs, or whether they manifest a sense that is in things themselves, prior to our perception and construction." Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 81. I engage critically with this approach to Merleau-Ponty's thought in my article, "The Subject of Radical Reflection: Self-Consciousness, Sociality, and Mortality in Merleau-Ponty" (unpublished paper).

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work," trans. Arleen B. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 10-11.

rationality and self-consciousness thus needs to be understood as integrated with his participation within a philosophical tradition concerned with subjectivity, rather than treated as a simple rejection of this paradigm (a rejection which, I have argued above, is inherently self-undermining).

Merleau-Ponty is one of several thinkers of the twentieth century, particularly within a phenomenological tradition, to rethink the Cartesian *cogito* in light of a reflection on the finitude and situatedness of human thought. His engagement with this question is developed particularly in critical dialogue with his contemporary and sometime colleague and friend Jean-Paul Sartre's radical renewal of the *cogito* in the context of his philosophy of freedom. What is most notable in this respect is that Sartre's renewal of the *cogito* through the radical dualism of being-in-itself and being-for-itself is premised precisely on a *negative* conception of freedom as the *flight from identity*; and it is such a negative conception that Merleau-Ponty will seek to move beyond in his own account of selfhood and freedom. In the view of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, human consciousness is defined by its unceasing negation of all determinacy, such that the subject immediately "nihilates" every designation of an identity as soon as they receive it. Identity, as a status held in the world, is on the side of being-in-itself, as an inert and worldly *being*, while freedom and subjectivity are on the side of being-for-itself, as an *existence* which ceaselessly nihilates the determinacy of being. This is why "we are condemned to be free," in Sartre's famous words: even an identity that we avowedly affirm is one that we cannot fail to flee, since it assigns us an inert and fixed *being*, while our freedom negates being in its perpetual flight from determinacy.[15] For Sartre, then, "[t]he ontological error of Cartesian rationalism is not to have seen" that if subjectivity entails "the

[15] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1984), 439.

primacy of existence over essence, it cannot be conceived as a substance."[16] Consciousness is irrefutable insofar as it is *insubstantial*, negating all determinacy in its every encounter with the world. In place of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," Sartre's revised Cartesianism can be summarised by the credo "I think, therefore I am not." Sartre is thus a key thinker in the tradition which associates emancipation with the *flight from identity*, which I above showed to be at stake within poststructuralism and the contemporary humanities.

Merleau-Ponty also engages in a rethinking of the Cartesian *cogito* in light of the questions of freedom and the worldly situatedness of human thought and action. But he questions the opposition between consciousness and being which Sartre regards as the necessary, radical outcome of a theory of the subject (and which, it may be added, is also presumed by many more contemporary opponents of philosophies of subjectivity, who oppose the category of the subject because of the mastery and separation from the world they believe it entails). For Merleau-Ponty, the capacity of consciousness to reflect on itself by no means entails its fundamental separation from the world. On the contrary, because of the constitutive non-identity or difference between any act of self-reflection and a consciousness's situated and embodied being-in-the-world, the subject of reflection never catches hold of themselves in a pure retreat from this world. To question the objects of one's perception, as a reflective subject does (such as, famously, in Descartes' *Meditations*), one must recognise that one is capable of error *about* oneself, insofar as we relate to ourselves, as to external objects and other people, through perception. This recognition, Merleau-Ponty argues, is impossible within the terms of Sartre's in-itself/for-itself dichotomy: "If

[16] Ibid., 17. On the same question of the insubstantiality of reflective consciousness as a critique of Cartesianism, Sartre writes further on: "[T]he appearance of the for-itself or absolute event refers indeed to the effort of an in-itself to found itself; it corresponds to an attempt on the part of being to remove contingency from its being. But this attempt results in the nihilation of the in-itself, because the in-itself can not found *itself* without introducing the *self* or a reflective, nihilating reference into the absolute identity of its being and consequently degenerating into *for-itself*" (133).

consciousness is placed outside of being, then it can never be penetrated by being."[17] By treating consciousness as other to the world in its negativity, Sartre suggests that, while this consciousness certainly does not have objective knowledge of the world, it can never be mistaken *about itself*, since it has no objective existence *in* the world that could make it opaque to its own self-reflection.[18]

Merleau-Ponty overturns such an account of the separation of reflective consciousness from the world, while retaining a conception of self-relation and self-consciousness as constitutive. He does so by grasping reflective thought as a *living activity* which reaches back towards its condition of possibility in one's "unreflected," embodied life as a being in the world – "unreflected" because it necessarily precedes and is never 'finally' caught up with by reflective thought.[19] Consciousness is neither collapsed into the world as mere 'matter' nor separated from the world as pure negativity, but is understood as an ongoing activity of situating oneself in the world in response to one's experience, including one's experience of *oneself* as a phenomenon one does not understand in any final or complete way. It is this perpetual encounter with one's own being-in-the-world as never simply recuperable within thought which opens Merleau-Ponty's philosophy up to a thinking of identity, in distinction from Sartre's negative treatment of identity as pertaining to the in-itself as that which consciousness perpetually flees. The reflective thought of a subject does not remove this subject from the world, but extends this subject's perpetual, ongoing activity of situating themselves in and communicating with the "thickness" of the world of their experience,

[17] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (Routledge, 2012), 126.
[18] On this point, Margaret Whitford writes: "Error… can be of two kinds; firstly, error concerning the world, as when on a dark night we think we see a man standing by the roadside but coming closer find that it is only a bush; secondly, error concerning ourselves, as when we think we are seeing something but there is nothing there (as in the case of hallucinations) or when we think we have a feeling (such as being in love) and we are mistaken. It is the second kind of error in particular, error concerning ourselves, that Merleau-Ponty finds incomprehensible in *en-soi/pour-soi* terms." Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy* (Lexington, Kentucy: French Forum, 1982), 33.
[19] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxiii.

through which they develop and refine an account of their own participation within it, as an account of their own *identity* as a being in this world.[20]

The debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty may appear to be consigned to a long-surpassed paradigm in the history of thought; in returning to it here, I suggest that this is by no means the case. While Sartre's thought has been overwhelmingly dismissed within the humanities for half a century, because of what is understood to be its 'humanist' assertion of subjective freedom (often wrongly construed as a freedom of action or will), as I have meant to argue here, the contemporary humanities retain an unacknowledged affinity with Sartre in their association of liberation with the flight from identity. It is *this* association that Merleau-Ponty criticises in his response to Sartre and in his larger philosophy, and it is in the context of his development of an alternative approach to freedom, in terms of a taking up of identity as the living, finite existence one is responsible for, that I argue his thought holds great pertinence to the contemporary humanities, and to what I have here outlined as the project of criticising and overcoming the attitude of mastery.[21] His work attains further pertinence to contemporary discussions when we consider that his elaboration of a philosophical critique of mastery grounded in the self-consciousness of our participation in the world that we contemplate is tied directly to his account of *modernity*. Given that, as we have seen, the concept of modernity has been widely understood within the humanities of recent decades as inseparable from the attitude of mastery and the dualism and violence of self and other,

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[20] Ibid., 211.

[21] The one figure in the poststructuralist canon to acknowledge their debt to Sartre's thought is Deleuze, who refers to the influence of Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* on his own philosophy in both *Logic of Sense* (trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, Columbia University Press, 1990), and in his final essay, "Immanence: A Life," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (trans. Anne Boyman, Zone Books, 2001). It may be added that Barthes maintained an ambiguous relationship to Sartre's thought, with his first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, written in critical response to Sartre's *What is Literature?*, while his last work, *Camera Lucida*, is dedicated to Sartre's early work, *L'imaginaire*. The significance of Sartre's *Transcendence* to a (usually avowedly anti-Sartrean) literature of the flight from identity will be discussed below, in Chapter Three and in the Conclusion; Merleau-Ponty's critique of the anti-social dimension of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* will further be discussed in Chapter Two.

resituating Merleau-Ponty's account of modernity as precisely that mode of historical existence and self-consciousness which can overcome the attitude of mastery offers a further crucial contribution to contemporary reflections on this question.

4. Reframing Modernity: Beyond "*L'homme accompli*"

In a 1948 series of radio lectures or *Causeries* (known in English under the title *The World of Perception*), Merleau-Ponty presents the key concerns of his philosophy to a wider audience, and he does so by centring his focus upon a concept that has not tended to be discussed in relation to his work: modernity. In these lectures, Merleau-Ponty provides a critique of the attitude of mastery, of a kind which in one respect is familiar, given what I above described as the contemporary humanities' recurrent engagement in such a critique. But whereas this contemporary critique ties the attitude of mastery to the very notions of modernity and the self, such that freedom is located in the flight from each of these, for Merleau-Ponty it is the experience of modernity, properly recognised, which enables an overcoming of the attitude of mastery and the damaged life it produces.

Merleau-Ponty's work continually returns to the insight that a modern form of knowledge is at its core a self-reflexive one, and that to forget this self-reflexivity – as science is perpetually at risk of doing – is to fail to live up to the promise of modernity. In the 1948 lectures, Merleau-Ponty emphasises this theme, beginning with a reflection on the French philosophical tradition's denigration of perception in favour of a non-sensuous rationality, exemplified by Descartes' *Meditations*.[22] Rather than treating the perception of living subjects as "no more than the confused beginnings of scientific knowledge," as

[22] Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (Routledge, 2004), 40-42.

Descartes does, a "modern philosophy" has the capacity and responsibility to question "whether science does, or ever could, present us with a picture of the world which is complete, self-sufficient and somehow closed in upon itself."[23]

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between what he calls the classical world of belief in the rationality of the universe and in the objectivity of science (by which he means the age of Copernicus and of Descartes, what in English is now called the early modern period) and a modern self-consciousness towards the involvement of human thought in the world it investigates, which takes up a questioning attitude towards the idea that rationality precedes and organises existence. He identifies this modern outlook in the art, science, and philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In what follows, while I will cite Merleau-Ponty's terminology of "classical" versus "modern," it will be useful to understand these rather as 'early' and 'late' modern, or unself-conscious modernity and the self-consciousness of modernity, respectively. What Merleau-Ponty calls the modern worldview is, in large part, defined by a critical reflection upon the confident, unreflective modernity of a "classical" outlook assured of its power to know the world without ambiguity and without remainder.

The confidence of the classical or early modern attitude, in understanding the universe as knowable in itself from an external, objective point of view, projects an image of the subject of this objective knowledge as a "fully-formed man" (*l'homme accompli*), able to

[23] Ibid., 43. As Merleau-Ponty adds, in carrying out this questioning, philosophy only draws out the consequences of what science itself has now discovered, most significantly in the case of Einsteinian relativity: namely, that "absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream," given that "each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation" (44). Contemporary science thus "rejects the notion of an absolute observer," and philosophy must honour these insights by accounting for the situated, embodied, sensuous condition of the acquisition of – and the search for – knowledge of the world.

"see through to the very being of things and establish a sovereign knowledge."[24] Once we begin to look at human beings "from the outside," however, we see that no human being is "fully-formed," because to *practice* reason is always to be involved in the activity of *striving* for reason and *questioning* whether the viewpoint one has attained is reasonable. As such, the difference between an adult and a child, or between a human being and a non-human animal, is not the difference between one who has transcended mere physical life and another who is entirely limited to it, such that the former could know the latter as an external object that has nothing to do with them. Rather, it is a difference in the extent to which they are capable of engaging in this self-questioning practice of reason, as a reflection upon their own activity and their own purposes. Understanding reason in these terms, as a relationship taken up by living beings to their own life and to the world they inhabit, means that a child and a non-human animal are not foreign objects to the reasoning individual, and instead this individual must reflect on what they themselves share with the child and with other animals. Reason only proves itself *as* reason by "acknowledg[ing] that its world is also unfinished," acknowledging that it is achieved not as a break from the supposed pre-rationality of life but as a deepening of the relationship of life to itself that is at stake already in the life of both children and non-human animals.[25] What Merleau-Ponty here calls modernity is this self-conscious relationship taken up by subjects as rational living beings to themselves, the world, and their own history, such that at every step the effort to provide a rational account of the world is accompanied by a reflection upon oneself as the subject of this knowledge, a subject who remains part of the natural and historical world that they are reflecting upon, susceptible to the same fragility and fallibility as the other forms of life they identify and study, and whose reason is thus never complete or achieved.

[24] Ibid., 71.
[25] Ibid., 73.

Such an understanding of modernity as an attitude which acknowledges our own determinacy as living beings, and which recognises that knowledge is a living activity and is thus intrinsically situated and finite, is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's conception of freedom. In the final chapter of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty articulates an approach to freedom not in terms of a flight from determinacy, but rather that of a taking up of our determinacy as contingent beings who exist in relation to others and to a world we are neither masters of nor removed from:

> It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. The only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up at first, rather than meeting up with the natural and human world through it. Nothing determines me from the outside, not that nothing solicits me, but rather because I am immediately outside of myself and open to the world. We are *true* right through; we carry with us – from the mere fact that we are in and toward the world [*au monde*] and not merely in the world [*dans le monde*], like things – all that is necessary for transcending ourselves.[26]

Freedom does not entail a stepping out of the 'facticity' of a situation, or of one's natural and social condition, because to be a subject is to take up a relationship to one's living condition, such that freedom is not a separate moment of the negation of our being, but a way of acknowledging and taking up our being.

Reading this text alongside his 1948 discussion of modernity, we can see that Merleau-Ponty considers the culture of modernity, as he understands it, to have a privileged capacity to cultivate such acknowledgement that our freedom is tied to our living existence and to the impermanent and partial nature of our knowledge. Moving away from understanding freedom as a flight from determinacy and identity – associated most immediately in the context of his time with the philosophy of Sartre – Merleau-Ponty instead locates freedom in the

[26] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 482-3.

responsibility of taking on the determinations we have received and working to live them out and revise them in light of what we learn through our ongoing contact with the world. What has more recently been criticised as the identity-thinking of modernity, as a worldview which presumes the mastery and self-transparency of a 'self' who is free in the sense of being undetermined by a world they can know without limitation, is here recast by Merleau-Ponty, who sees in modernity precisely the capacity to overcome this attitude of mastery, through an acknowledgement of our own situated, living condition, not as a simple affirmation of finitude, but as an acknowledgement of our own responsibility for how we live and the identities we take on in the world and in relation to others.[27]

5. Capitalism and Modernity: Redetermining Identity

The category of modernity has been perpetually tied, since the work of Karl Marx, to another, more 'concrete,' historical and economic category: namely, the emergence and rise to global predominance of capitalism.[28] In what ways are the questions of identity and freedom raised here to be understood in relation to the forms of social life enabled by capitalism as a mode of production? While a Marxian framework is able to recognise that the question of *who we are*

[27] While Merleau-Ponty may be responding most directly to Sartre here, it is worth considering what I above characterised as a a more recent tendency to associate freedom with the flight from identity in light of the alternative here offered by Merleau-Ponty. A notable case in point is Foucault's late text, "What is Enlightenment?", which renews the notions of modernity and freedom in the context of a rereading of Kant's canoncial essay. Foucault proposes that modernity is an attitude taken up by subjects to their present, an attitude at once of understanding and of critique; this "critical ontology of ourselves" should be conceived, Foucault argues, "as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (in *The Foucault Reader*, 32-50: 50). While important and insightful in the relationship it draws between modernity, subjectivity, and freedom, there remains, I would suggest, a one-sided negativity to Foucault's conception of this moment of critical subjective freedom, which he presents as an escape from determination (an *Ausgang*, recalling the term Kant uses to define Enlightenment), a leap from the determinacy we have critically excavated into the "experiment" of "going beyond" this determinacy. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of freedom, I would suggest, offers an answer to the one-sided negativity of Foucault's approach as much as it does to that of Sartre.

[28] A canonical example is Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010).

and *how we should live* is always at least implicitly operative in all societies, since the very notion of a mode of production posits that the fundamental concern of any society is that of the reproduction of life, Marx argues that capitalist relations make the question of identity available in a qualitatively distinct way, through the distinction it institutes between a *person* and the *social role(s)* they perform.

In his *Grundrisse*, Marx makes a distinction between capitalism and previous social formations, which goes to the heart of his account of capitalism's specificity: previous societies, he writes, are based in "relationships of personal dependence," while capitalism is defined by "personal independence based in dependence mediated by things."[29] This distinction is essential to Marx's entire social theory, and to his understanding of both the achievements and limitations of capitalism. While the distinction operates on a vast level, incorporating all non-capitalist societies into a single general category, it does so for the purpose of defining what is radically new about the social relations instituted by capitalism. Pre-capitalist societies – such as, most paradigmatically for Marx, European feudalism – are defined by direct relations of personal dependence, such as that of a serf who works for a particular lord who has direct, personal power over them. The relations of dependence that exist between these individuals are concrete, and the labour performed by the serf is transparently performed *for* this individual who has power over him: "labour and its products… take the shape, in the transactions of society, of services in kind and payments in kind. …[E]very serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord, is a definite quantity of his own labour power."[30] In this context, from the point of view of society as a whole, an individual's personhood is inseparable from their social role: "individuals… only

[29] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Penguin, 1973), 95; cited in Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London: Routledge, 1990), 8.
[30] Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), 77, cited in Sayer, 11.

enter into relations with each other as individuals in a particular determination, as feudal lord and vassal, lord of the manor and serf, etc., or as members of castes, etc., or as members of an estate, etc."[31] Individuals can of course desire and struggle to attain a station they are not born into, and a serf may dream of becoming a lord, or simply of being free of their indentured position; but there exists no socially enshrined distinction between a person's individuality and their status *as* some concrete social actor, as serf or lord, peasant or nobleman. A person's social status is "a quality inseparable from his individuality."[32]

In a capitalist society based in wage-labour, by contrast, the relations between producers and those who control production take the form of contracts drawn between 'free' individuals: a wage-labourer is not compelled through threat of violence to work for this particular employer, but rather the two enter an agreement about the amount of work to be done for an amount of payment. Outside of this arrangement, the two are free individuals; if they pass each other on the street outside of working hours, they do so as nominal equals, in a way that would be unthinkable in a pre-capitalist society. From a capitalist perspective, individuals are independent persons first who *enter into* concrete social relations with others, as employee or employer, patron or recipient. This free individual separate from their concrete social relations is essentially contentless, defined by "sheer, blank, individuality"[33]: this individuality is simply the negation of all concrete particularity, which one takes on secondarily, in the relationships which one ('freely') enters into. Since these relationships are *entered into* rather than a direct *function* of one's social role, they are in principle open to revision: if I as an individual citizen decide that the particular relationships I have entered

[31] *Grundrisse*, 411, cited in Sayer, 11.
[32] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works* 5 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 78; cited in Sayer, 37.
[33] Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," *Collected Works* 3, 77; cited in Sayer, 53.

into – of work, family, status – are no longer to my liking, I am free to renounce them in favour of others. "Present-day civil society," Marx writes, "is the realised principle of individualism; the individual existence is the final goal; activity, work, content, etc., are mere means."[34] These latter, concrete properties – the things that I do – are now taken to be separable from the individual I *am*, such that the person is always distinguishable from the concrete relations and activities into which they enter.

For Marx, this transformation involves both a loss and a gain in the social recognition bestowed upon individuals. Prior to capitalism, human beings in their concrete particularity are regarded as the end or purpose of social production itself: everything that is collectively done through labour and through political management of the relations that determine this labour is done to the end of serving the community of individuals *as* the concrete individuals they are (with all of the extreme inequality that this concreteness entails). From one perspective, this "old view according to which man always appears… as the end of production, seems very exalted when set against the modern world, in which production is the end of man, and wealth the end of production. …[T]he childish world of antiquity appears as something superior."[35] Where capitalism treats human labour as a means to the end of the abstract accumulation of wealth to the benefit of 'the economy' as an abstract force estranged from individuals, the economic activity of pre-capitalist societies is concerned with the direct *satisfaction* of the needs of the community of individuals each in their concrete particularity. But the satisfaction in question is "satisfaction from a narrow standpoint," a "traditional satisfaction of existing needs and the reproduction of old ways of life confined within long-established and complacently accepted limits."[36] Capitalism, by contrast, organises human

[34] Marx, "Contribution," 81.
[35] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 411-12; cited in Sayer, 12.
[36] Ibid.

activity to the direct end of the advancement of economic growth, with the satisfaction of human needs merely an indirect effect of this process, enacted abstractly through economic management of overall supply and demand rather than through attention to the concrete, distinct needs of specific individuals. Just as the individuals who enter the labour process are considered abstractly, as free individuals without determinate qualities who provide a certain quantity of their generic labour-power, so the individuals who consume the goods thus produced (many of whom are of course the same individuals as these labourers) are considered equally abstractly: their satisfaction is not the end of economic activity, rather their consumption in pursuit of satisfying their own needs is a *means* to the end of economic growth, which is economic activity's explicit purpose.

Capitalism thus loses the pre-modern attention to the living, socially embedded particularity of individuals as distinct members of a community, with distinct needs proper to this particularity; the individual from the point of view of the capitalist economy is instead emptied of all living content, regarded as an abstract unit, whether in their contribution to the labour process, their consumption, or their status as a citizen. But this loss of recognition of individuals' concrete particularity in the organisation of the economic process is precisely what opens up the possibility for individuals to take up a free relation *to* their own particularity, to the concrete, living activity that they perform and that determines them in relation to others *as* someone in particular. In pre-capitalist societies, the individual is treated as a concrete and living being, but such concreteness renders this individual fixed in their particularity: this condition "turns him into an animal that is directly identical with its function."[37] Capitalism's establishment of the principle of the abstract individual recognises the individual's humanity in a distinct way, for this individual is regarded not as this or that

[37] Marx, "Contribution," 81.

type of person (akin to this or that species of animal, a static category they are defined within), but simply as *an* individual human, in their generic being or "species-being,"[38] comparable to any other individual. Humanity as such becomes a question, since individuals are now increasingly thought of as abstract members of the human race rather than as distinct 'types' or 'castes'. This, Marx argues, is a vital advance in human freedom, instituting the principle of the equality of all individuals.

But this modern era "makes the opposite mistake" from the pre-modern one, writes Marx. "It separates the objective essence of the human being from him as merely something external, material. It does not accept the content of the human being as his true reality."[39] By regarding the individual as a contentless subject of abstract rights, capitalism treats all that is objective and particular about this individual as a living being as extraneous, secondary, external to who they truly are. If pre-capitalist social formations recognise individuals in their concrete particularity as living beings at the expense of their human capacity to relate critically to whatever particular content they are determined by, capitalism recognises the individual's abstract humanity at the expense of their particularity as a living, concrete individual within a larger environment. In pre-capitalist societies, identities are recognised at the expense of subjectivity, while under capitalism, subjectivity is recognised at the expense of identity.

While the capitalist transformation of the social relations through which individuals are recognised is an essential step forward in human freedom, Marx argues, the prospect of freedom held out by capitalist modernity can only be realised by integrating the abstractly

[38] Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Norton, 1978), 66-125.
[39] Marx, "Contribution," 81; cited in Sayer, 56.

free individual with the living being in their concrete particularity. Communism is Marx's name for a society in which this unity of the individual's abstract human freedom and their concrete particularity as a living being is socially recognised, through a transformation of the end or purpose of production. In the same section of the *Grundrisse* cited above, Marx adds a third, prospective age to the pre-capitalist world of "relationships of personal dependence" and the capitalist world of "personal independence based upon dependence *mediated by things*." This he calls the age of "[f]ree individuality, based on the universal development of the individuals and the subordination of their communal, social productivity, which is their social possession."[40] Social productivity is here "subordinat[ed]" to the ends decided upon by individuals themselves, for productive activity is explicitly understood to be directed to the end of bettering the *living* conditions of the community of individuals in their concrete particularity, rather than fulfilling human ends only via the abstract mediation of the capitalist market, which regards individuals as isolated units rather than qualitatively concrete individuals. In other words, in a communist society as Marx defines it, the *subjects* carrying out productive activity and decision do so by directly taking themselves (that is, their community as a whole, with all of the particularities this community includes) as the *objects* of this activity. In communist society as Marx defines it, *subjects* act to the end of supporting the flourishing of individuals in their concrete *identities* – not the static, functional identities recognised in pre-capitalist societies, but the living, human identities that subjects take on and to which they bear a self-conscious relationship (it is this self-conscious relationship *to* one's identity/ies, rather than any particular content *of* the identities themselves, which makes them distinctly human, following Marx's notion of species-being).

[40] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 95; cited in Sayer, 8.

The idea that communism represents a *rational* society – another term which the contemporary humanities have learnt to see as an *alibi* for domination and as premised upon a binarism of (rational) self and (irrational) other – can be reframed in light of the account just given, and following Merleau-Ponty's distinction between a classical and a modern worldview. There is one way of understanding the social achievement of rationality as that of a fully administered society, in which the externally knowing power of the state would use this knowledge to meet the needs of the people, who would recognise this state as their benefactor – this, corresponding to what Merleau-Ponty calls the classical conception of reason, is an interpretation of Marx's thinking that has been accepted by many supporters and detractors of communism as a political project. But the worldly achievement of reason permits of a *modern* interpretation in the sense Merleau-Ponty gives to this term – and I mean to suggest that this latter understanding is the one at stake in Marx's thinking. On this understanding, the fullest achievement of rationality is that of recognising the worldliness of knowledge and reason *as such*, their dependence upon living, embodied beings as a condition of their possibility. Our living and embodied existence is not a limitation upon some ideal, truer form of knowledge and reason that would be accessible if only these conditions were transcended (by God, or by the ideal state or bureaucracy), but is intrinsic to what reason and knowledge *are*, as the inquiring and self-conscious activity of certain living beings.[41]

The insight that reason is intrinsically situated, living, and purposive, shared by Marx and Merleau-Ponty, sows doubt in the picture of an external and objective knowledge. But, as they both recognise, this insight in itself is not enough, just as capitalism's unleashing of the abstract human individual from the particularism of community-based identity is a necessary

[41] Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Pantheon, 2019) has importantly reframed an Marx's theory of value and his conception of a post-capitalist society in terms of a philosophical account of constitutive finitude, and an understanding of the finite time of life as the "originary measure of value" (especially pp. 219-220).

but insufficient step towards honouring the distinct capacities of human beings as *both* living and self-conscious, both identity and subject. For both Marx and Merleau-Ponty, the critical insight of modernity's problematisation of the classical view of the world and the beings within it as static objects of knowledge ultimately demands the development of new *institutional* forms in which the worldliness or secularity of all knowledge and all purposes is objectively recognised. Marx considers the abolition (the *Aufhebung*) of the proletariat essential to this accomplishment, by uniting the negative freedom of the disembedding of individuals from communally fixed identities with the positive freedom of pursuing self-determined ends in one's own life-activity – something barred to a proletariat, who can only express their freedom as a freedom *from* a communally fixed identity, by taking on the status of an abstract individual whose labour-power is available for purchase. Insofar as the wealth of capitalist society as such is dependent upon proletarian labour, this society as a whole is unable to institute this recognition of free individuals as *substantive subjects* in positive pursuit of their own ends. It is in this sense, I argue, that the critique of capitalism is at stake in reflections from within modernity upon the frustrations of identity: capitalism provides certain resources for articulating identity as a question whose answer is not set in place by one's birth or social position, even as it fails to recognise identities except in terms of their contributions to an economic growth indifferent to the particularity of human activity.

For Merleau-Ponty, this possibility of instituting recognition of the concrete and self-conscious beings we are, which Marx locates in a future communist society, is to be understood in terms of what, in the final sentences of the last of these radio lectures, he calls the central problem of his era, which is that of "how, in our time and with our own experience, to do what was done in the classical period."[42] Like Marx, Merleau-Ponty's

[42] Ibid., 112-3.

concern is with the task of achieving a new unity between two pictures of the world that have hitherto been kept apart and in opposition: that which gives solidity to the world and to individuals in the form of the identities they hold (what he calls the classical), and that which recognises the presence of subjects to the world and to themselves, as a self-critical relationship they take up to their given identities (what he calls the modern).[43] It is as an engagement with the tension proper to the experience of modernity, and in the context of efforts to imagine going beyond modernity itself, that I wish to situate the concerns of modernist art, as an art perennially engaged with the releasing of subjects from the static confines of given identities, alongside the frustration of the efforts subjects make to institute their self-conceptions.

6. Modernism, Aesthetic Experience, and the Unmaking of Identity

Many of the poststructuralist thinkers mentioned above developed their accounts of the self's decentredness and intrinsic corruption or incoherence through encounters with modernist or avant-garde literature: Lyotard on Mallarmé, Kristeva on "Joyce, Sollers, Burroughs," Barthes on Eisenstein or Brecht.[44] Foucault cites a line from Samuel Beckett as the credo of

[43] Marx's notion of the pre-modern and pre-capitalist and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the classical cannot be entirely mapped onto each other; for what Merleau-Ponty calls the classical world is that of the scientific revolution, itself vital to the development of capitalism and modernity (hence my reframing of it as 'early modernity'). But rather than this pointing to a contradiction between their presentations of this question, I would argue that Merleau-Ponty introduces a nuance into the understanding of modernity gained from Marx. If modernity involves the *desolidification* of the world and a heightened sense of the individual's distance (or alienation) from the social and natural worlds, an essential step in this process is the making available of the world as an *object* of knowledge (to science or art). This is a kind of solidification that anticipates its own desolidification, because in seeking to know the world it removes it from the immediacy of unreflective, lived relations. The ambiguity here in spelling out the relationship between Marx's central distinction and Merleau-Ponty's reveals a more fundamental point, which is that the move towards treating the world as an object of knowledge – and then towards the subsequent step of *problematising* the world's solidity, treating it as mediated by subjective impressions – must always be operative as a possibility or horizon, even in 'pre-modern' societies, since these societies are of course engaged in reflection on the world in the interpersonal relations operative within them, and the transition from this to the more starkly objectifying and externalising attitude of the classical/early modern view should not be understood in terms of an absolute break.

[44] Kristeva, "The System and the Speaking Subject," 32. Barthes, "The Third Meaning"; "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

his “What is an Author?”, which has become a canonical essay of poststructuralism’s unmaking or deconstruction of the self: “What does it matter who is speaking”?[45] The idea that modernist art of the later nineteenth and early-mid twentieth centuries anticipated or influenced the theorisation of the ‘postmodern subject’ as divided or schizophrenic has also been proposed in recent scholarship.[46] As such, those modes of artistic experimentation that have come to be understood under the umbrella of *modernism* suggest something very different from the project of *modernity* as a social-historical process or achievement, which has been criticised precisely for what is seen as its valorisation of the mastery of the self over an inert world of others, accomplished through “progress.” A modern art which undoes the conventionalised boundaries of what art does and can be would thus from this perspective be better understood as a reaction *against* the project of modernity, rather than as a participant within it. In this context, contemporary aesthetic theory’s most significant inheritor of the broadly poststructuralist tradition, Jacques Rancière, has proposed that the whole category of ‘modern’ art, with its implication of a link between artistic experimentation and a politics of avant-garde transformation, is essentially incoherent.

The view I seek to defend in this dissertation is that these questions can be helpfully reframed if, following Merleau-Ponty, we decouple the category of modernity from the notion of mastery – not by denying that it has been used to the end of upholding an attitude of the self’s mastery over an inert world of others, but by showing that internal to the very notion of modernity are the means to overcome this imperialistic attitude to which it has often been tied, by supporters and detractors alike. The very ambivalence of much art that has been called modernist towards the idea or project of modernity can be better understood in this

[45] Cited in Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *The Foucault Reader*, 101.
[46] Adam Meehan, *Modernism and Subjectivity: How Modernist Fiction Invented the Postmodern Subject* (Louisiana State University, 2020).

light – in their attention to what Merleau-Ponty calls the "thickness of the world," to the inseparability of thought and life and the falsity of any presumed external, disembodied knowledge or "*pensée de survol*" ("high-altitude thinking"),[47] modernisms participate in a critical revaluation of *one* predominant framing of modernity, as an attitude of mastery and control. But in doing so, I argue, they make available what I call the hidden promise of modernity: the promise to no longer be burdened by debilitating fantasies of mastering the world and ourselves, by recognising that a life we share with others, and which reflective thought never stands outside of, is the condition of everything we think and do. It is through a re-reading of modernist art which considers its unmaking of mastery in terms of a redetermination, rather than a renunciation, of identity, that its engagement with questions of modernity can be understood. This dissertation sets out such a re-reading, through a focus on works by three figures who push a modernist problematisation of identity to extreme ends: Gustave Flaubert, Samuel Beckett, and Jean-Luc Godard.

'Modernism' and 'modernity' have been linked, most basically, with respect to the idea of an emancipation from tradition: just as modernity designates such an emancipation on a social-historical level, modernism refers to the carrying out of this emancipation within art. 'Tradition' here does not simply mean what is old, what existed previously: it refers to a way of living which accepts a given set of normative values as intrinsically meaningful, and which sees worth in their sustenance and reproduction. To be emancipated from tradition is then to be emancipated from the assumption that there is a true and appropriate *use* and *place* for everything and everyone, and to free oneself to look at the world in light of one's own capacity to (re)determine it, to give it meaning. Modernism and modernity have been linked

[47] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 73.

by the idea that a modernist art's refutation of conventions of representation participates in modernity's rejection of tradition in pursuit of collective self-determination and freedom. But the question then arises: are freedom and self-determination meaningful or coherent as the ends of art? Aesthetic experience, if it is to have any determinacy as a distinct mode of experience made available by art, offers something other than the achievement of rationally chosen purposes; it is, rather, a mode of experience in which all such purposes are put in question, rendered strange. In Rancière's words, "[t]he aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself."[48] In this light, relations between modernism and modernity become less clear: the emancipation of art from tradition, in the sense of a conventionalised conception of what is appropriate to the different arts, does not lead to a form of life that is self-determining in the sense of becoming transparent to itself. What this emancipation of art promises, rather, is the cultivation of an aesthetic mode of existence in which the identities through which the world has been put into a given order are suspended and undermined. Such suspension does not apply only to a traditional order that is to be replaced, but to any ordering whatsoever, including that of a 'modern' society. Yet while this tension leads Rancière to dismiss the category of artistic modernism altogether, seeing in it a confusion between the establishment of a certain paradigm of art on the one hand, and a political orientation "to break with the past or anticipate the future" on the other, I want to suggest that the category is not so easily abandoned.[49]

In the approach I take here, modernism is understood most basically as a form of art which acknowledges a tension between form and content. Modernism gnaws away at the idea of an appropriate rendering of the world as an object of beholding and contemplation (or, we

[48] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 24.
[49] Ibid., 20.

might say, mastery). In so doing, it problematises identity, by neglecting to provide any harmonious unity between a depicted content and the form through which this content is presented: the identities at stake on the level of the depicted content are problematised, undermined, or otherwise *unmade* by a formal treatment which regards them aesthetically, in a way which divests them of the self-conceptions through which they have situated themselves in the world.

An illustrative example can be made in comparing the famous description of the Maison Vauquer at the opening of Honoré de Balzac's *Le père Goriot* with any number of deceptively similar descriptive passages in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the latter of which this dissertation treats as a paradigmatic early instance of the modernist novel.[50] The sensory details of Balzac's description of this boarding-house all serve the end of reconfirming that the world is animated and organised by the human meanings that are brought to it.

> The stone mantelpiece, beneath which a permanently clean hearth bears witness to the fact that a fire is only lit on special occasions, is adorned with two vases of ancient artificial flowers duly ranged on either side of a blue marble clock in execrable taste. This room gives off a smell for which our language has no special word; it can only be described as a *boarding house smell*. It smells stuffy, mouldy, rancid; it is chilly, clammy to breathe, permeates one's clothing; it leaves the stale taste of a room where people have been eating; it stinks of backstairs, scullery, workhouse. The red floor-tiles are full of grooves caused by scrubbing or repainting. In a word the drabbest poverty rules supreme; a pennypinching, concentrated, threadbare poverty. Squalor may not yet have taken over, but there are patches of it; all is not yet tattered and torn, but it is rotting away.[51]

A room exudes a certain smell, while its arrangement indicates bad taste and people fallen on hard times, situating its occupants in a certain social milieu; objects find their meaning in the traces of a human presence that they allegorise. Everything in the depicted world expresses a

[50] On the difference between Balzac and Flaubert in terms of this question of the latter's defamiliarisation of the reader's experience of the world, see Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 65-76; Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 32-33.
[51] Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-6.

human meaning, which the novelist brings to an appropriate form, allowing this world which we recognise as familiar to reveal its secrets, its unstated meanings.[52] In a novel of this kind, Jonathan Culler writes, "[t]he reader is supposed to pass through the language of the text to a reality that he recognizes and to which it refers. … To read the text is to identify the world to which it refers. To read is to recognize."[53]

It is to such a poetics of the novel that Flaubert's can be compared, to provide a sense of the force of a modernist unmaking of the identities through which a prior form of the novel had cohered the world:

> The town was asleep. The pillars of the market-house cast long shadows. The ground was entirely grey, as on a summer's night.
>
> But, as the doctor's house stood only fifty paces from the inn, they had to wish each other goodnight almost immediately, and the company dispersed.
>
> Emma, even from the entrance hall, felt the plaster's chill drop onto her shoulders like a damp cloth. The walls were newly done, and the wooden stairs creaked. In the bedroom, on the first floor, a whitish daylight fell through the curtainless windows. Tops of trees could be glimpsed, and the meadows further off, half-drowned in fog, smoking in the moonlight wherever the river wound.
>
> In the middle of the rooms, piled pell-mell, there were drawers, bottles, curtain-rods, gilt poles along with mattresses on chairs and basins on the parquet – the two men who had carried the furniture having left everything there, carelessly.
>
> It was the fourth time she had slept in an unknown place. The first had been the day of her entry into the convent; the second that of her arrival at Tostes, the third at Vaubyessard, the fourth was this one; and each had acted in her life like the unveiling of a fresh phase. She refused to believe that things could repeat themselves in the same way in different places, and as the portion already experienced had been bad, what remained to be consumed would doubtless be better.[54]

What has changed from Balzac? This scene depicts a perfectly 'realistic' situation, that of a young couple arriving in their new home, receiving a welcome from their new neighbours. But between the sensory information provided and the human meanings that are meant to make sense of this information, all genuine connection is absent. It is now a character, Emma Bovary, who performs the interpretative activity of uniting sensory details into a meaning,

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[52] As Jameson writes: "[I]n Balzac everything that looks like a physical sensation – a musty smell, a rancid taste, a greasy fabric – always means something, it is a sign or allegory of the moral or social status of a given character: decent poverry, squalor, the pretensions of the parvenu, the true nobility of the old aristocracy, and so on. ln short, it is not really a sensation, it is already a meaning, an allegory." (*The Antinomies of Realism*, 33.)
[53] Culler, *Flaubert*, 65; 68.
[54] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Morals*, trans. Adam Thorpe (London: Vintage, 2012), 81-2.

through her reflections on the significance of this, her first night in her new home at Yonville. But any attentive consideration of this passage will note how deeply unconvincing Emma's attempt to cohere her experience is. While she is telling herself a story about how the future will be better, what is happening around her? A description of an attractive evening is abruptly cut off, as the awkwardly short distance from the inn to the Bovarys' home interrupts the walk before it has begun. The adventure of a new start is underwhelmed by a cold and indifferent welcome, in an empty home with furniture strewn around carelessly. The glimpses Emma catches of her surroundings offer nothing that resonates with or that can help her to make sense of the human situation, while the social world of the town is shown to be one of disorder and mutual indifference. Emma's attempt to cohere these events into a personal meaning are implicitly shown to be exactly that, an attempt, a desperate reaction against the indifference of the world; so too, it may be supposed, is the Balzacian novelist seeking to stave off anxiety at the world's indifference to every meaning brought to it, through the demiurgic efforts of creating an order and pretending it was there all along. Balzac presents a world in which all human action is comprehended in its personal and social meaning, and thereby redeemed by the work of the novelist, who provides this content with the formal assurance of its validity and recognition; Flaubert presents a set of human meanings which fail utterly to comprehend the world they respond to, a world whose muteness and indifference provides an ironic commentary on the action, and on any effort by character and reader alike to make this world into one that will affirm the meanings and identities brought to it. This gulf between a depicted content and the formal regard upon this content carried out by the text is essential to Flaubert's modernism.

7. Modernism, Narrativity, Emancipation: On Rancière's Critique of Artistic Modernity

The works studied in this dissertation are works of *narrative* art, and in their modernism they provoke reflection upon narrative as such – these are texts which ask if narrative is possible, if it is trustworthy, if it is unavoidable, and what its capacities and its dangers are. This question of narrativity is inseparable from that of identity: to question the narrative organisation of the world and of the life of an individual or a community is to question the identities through which this world and these lives have been cohered. The failure of Emma's stories about herself and the world to gain any traction or receive any recognition solicits a reader's attention to the ungroundedness of the identity she seeks to give herself. The breakdown of narrative as a breakdown of identity becomes only more heightened in Beckett's *Fin de partie*, where Hamm clings to his interminable "story" as a desperate effort to have his performances of himself add up to a unity and a stability amidst a collapsed world; or in Godard's *Vivre sa vie*, where Nana's flight from the demand of others that she provide an account of herself and a narrative of her life and plans provokes a flight from identity, reinforced by the film's fragmentary narrative and shifting stylistic register. This problematisation of narrative, however, raises the same questions pointed to above: how can an art which reveals every narrative to be false or unconvincing be united with a political project of emancipation and self-determination? Is such emancipation not another narrative, one which assumes that political freedom will allow us to know ourselves and tell the 'true' stories of our lives – a narrative which art will unmake just as it has unmade the 'traditional' narratives? Does this not again show the impossibility of linking a 'modern' politics of transformation and emancipation to a so-called 'modern' art, since the latter will never

provide the solidity – the identity – of a 'true' narrative of the kind that this politics appears to seek?[55]

Here I want to suggest that, just as identity and narrative have been shown to be inseparable, so the points made above about the irreducibility of identity are equally true of narrativity: the claim to transcend or revoke narrative is immediately self-undermining, because such a claim is itself the assertion of a certain narrative.[56] This point by no means resolves the question of how we are to understand art's aesthetic treatment or problematisation of narrative, but it does indicate that the idea of a transcendence of narrative or of narrative identities is a poor way of answering it. An "aesthetic regime of art" cannot be equated with a simple renunciation or transcendence of narrative or identity, and what Rancière calls the "suspension" proper to aesthetic experience itself remains inseparable from a reflection upon how we may take up narratives and identities differently *in light of* this suspension.[57] Modernist art, as I understand it, unmakes identities and narratives *towards the end of opening up their redetermination*: the opening up of the aesthetic as a specific domain of experience made available by art, documented insightfully by Rancière, can only be understood in these terms, I argue, because this aesthetic experience can only be the experience *of someone*, who is engaged in an activity of reimagining how to live and connect

[55] Rancière links the problematisation of narrative in the arts of the 19th and 20th centuries to the failure of the category of an artistic modernity or modernism. Of Flaubert, he writes that the novelist's achievement lies in grasping the priority of "the microevents that weave the impersonal fabric upon which 'personal' experience draws its plots." (Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had To Be Killed," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), 233-248: 243-4.) In another framing of this same point about the discontinuity between the aesthetic experience made available by the art often called modernist and any 'modern' political project of emancipation, Rancière writes: "The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities." (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 26.)

[56] I return to this point in greater detail in the Conclusion to this dissertation.

[57] This point will be returned to in Chapter One, where I engage in some detail with Rancière's work on Flaubert.

with the world in the very experience of this suspension of the established narratives and identities through which they have oriented themselves.

To this end, I mean to suggest that the unmaking of the world proper to what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime of art – emblematised, we might say, by the empty, disheveled, unmade home Emma arrives at, which comments silently on her efforts to construct a story of which she is the heroine – cannot be simply separated from the positive demand for an emancipated life premised upon collective self-legislation, which is a legacy of the attitude of modernity. This is not to say that the relation between them is a straightforward one, or that modernist art is reducible to a particular political end. But the separation Rancière wishes to establish between a 'modern' goal of emancipation and an aesthetic unmaking of identity, order, and narrative relies upon the premise that such disidentification is not from the beginning entangled with the articulation of new forms of identification, that the former can simply be separated from the latter. In arguing that these moments cannot be separated, since there is always a *subject* of any disidentification who is engaged in the activity of redetermining themselves in the very disidentifying act, I further argue that the artistic gesture of unmaking narrative and identity cannot be separated from the positive aim of emancipation and self-determination, since to disidentify is to engage in the question of how one is to live and who one is to be.

Whatever ambiguity it retains in its linking of a certain set of artistic practices to social, historical, and political questions, the category of modernism remains unsurpassed for thinking about the forms of art approached in this dissertation, I argue, because it indicates art's involvement in the process of unmaking the order of representation, an unmaking which cannot fail to look towards a remaking of the world in light of what this suspension has made

available. Such art certainly does not tell us what the content of such a remade world and renewed life will or should be; but it participates in the adventure of modernity by cultivating in those who engage with it a self-conscious capacity to put our received narratives and identities in question, not to the end of an imagined escape from all identity, but rather to that of living in light of the impermanence and fragility of the narratives we take up as our own. Modernism is tied to the political possibilities (and risks) of modernity, insofar as it opens up to us a reflection upon the fragility of every way of cohering the world, and asks us to live in acknowledgement that no order of things guarantees the success or validity of the things we do or are committed to, that nothing beyond our life assures us of the right path or the true narrative. In its unmaking of seemingly stable and natural forms of order and representation, modernist art is inextricably linked to the opening up of the political question of the redetermination of social life.

8. "Je est un autre": Modernism and Self-Relation

In the radio lectures, Merleau-Ponty poses a link between his account of modernity and a certain kind of art that he calls modern. The link in question is that of the "unfinished" quality shared by modern artworks and the modern world itself. "In modernity," he writes, "it is not only works of art that are unfinished: the world they express is like a work which lacks a conclusion, and may never find one."[58] If the 'classical' worldview is confident in its own mastery of the world, this confidence has to do with its conception of the world itself as *complete*, able to be taken in fully and finally by an ideal observer; and as Merleau-Ponty shows, the art which corresponds to this 'classical' worldview follows the same logic.

[58] *The World of Perception*, 108 (translation revised).

Merleau-Ponty develops this argument with respect to perspective-based painting. Perspective painting presents objects not as they appear in the actual experience of vision, in which one's gaze fixes upon one thing, and then another, and one constructs a sense of the whole visible environment only through an ongoing and continually revised synthesis of these sequential perceptions, but rather "with the conventional size and aspect that [they] would present in a gaze directed at a particular vanishing point on the horizon, a point in relation to which the landscape is then arranged along lines running from the painter to the horizon." The painter will often "close one eye and measure the apparent size of a particular detail with his pencil, thereby altering it": what the painter is depicting is not what he, or anyone, sees – even if they stand at this ideal position taking in the landscape against the horizon – but what an ideally detached observer 'would' see. But no such ideal observer does or could exist, because, as Merleau-Ponty argues throughout his work, to perceive is already to take up an engaged and partial perspective and attitude towards what one perceives, if for nothing else because any present perception exists in relation to previous ones. Every observer is a partial observer, since the scene they put together in any single perception is informed by their prior perceptions.[59] Landscapes as presented in perspective painting, by contrast, "have a peaceful look, an air of respectful decency, which comes of their being held beneath a gaze fixed at infinity. They remain at a distance and do not involve the viewer. They are polite company: the gaze passes without hindrance over a landscape which offers no resistance to this supremely easy movement."[60] The world, from this nonexistent ideal perspective, is a finished one, and art's work is to abstract itself from the 'errors' of engaged, lived experience of the world by attaining the position that allows this finished world to be

[59] "Every perception presupposes a certain past of the subject." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 294.
[60] *The World of Perception*, 52-3.

presented, announcing to its beholder that truth is available for possession only by one who is themselves outside the world and outside the partiality of living, situated engagement.

The works studied in this dissertation are united by their shared reflection upon the failure of this attitude of mastery as a model of art, of knowledge, and of ethical life. Again, it can be noted that there are two ways to conceive of this critique of mastery: one which conceives of it as a refutation of every form of selfhood, seeing the latter as intrinsically tied to mastery and thus locating emancipation in the dissolution of all selves; and another which conceives of it as a *redetermination* of selfhood, of the ways that human beings take up conceptions of themselves in their interactions with others and the world. The former of these views, which links the critique of mastery to the critique of identity *per se*, is taken up within the broadly poststructuralist engagement with modernist art, as suggested above. Lyotard draws a contrast between "the artists and writers who question the rules of plastic and narrative arts" and those defenders of a rearguard position who are "concerned with 'reality' and 'identity'."[61] For Lyotard, in breaking down art's presumed *representational* function, this rule-breaking art also undermines every form of identity. In this context, he cites Marcel Proust's *Recherche* as a modernist work which undoes a certain principle of the self by attending to this self's unmaking through time: in Proust, he writes, the "identity of consciousness" becomes "a victim to the excess of time."[62]

A problematisation of identity is certainly at stake in modernist art, and it will find some of its most pronounced expressions in the works studied in the following chapters. In its unmaking of a representational conception of art of the kind associated with what Merleau-

[61] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 75.
[62] Ibid., 80.

Ponty calls the "classical" worldview, modernism damages the 'masterful' understanding of the person as transparently knowable, representable, and internally coherent. According to Irving Howe, "[c]haracter, for modernists like Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, … is regarded not as a coherent, definable and well-structured entity, but as a psychic battlefield, or an insoluble puzzle, or the occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations. This tendency to dissolve character into a stream of atomized experiences… gives way… to an opposite tendency… in which character is severed from psychology and confined to a sequence of severely objective events."[63] In undermining the presumption that the world can be mastered by a disembodied gaze, modernism problematises the representability of the person as a *meaningful* unit, as someone whose actions and interiority can find meaning within a picture of the world that could be drawn and that would situate them within it.

But this problematisation of identity practiced within modernist works, I argue, is insufficiently grasped by a position which sees in them the sheer dissolution of identity, understood as a living self-relation. The unmaking of identity as self-sameness through "the excess of time" alluded to by Lyotard with regard to Proust can itself be understood as an opening up of the question of identity as a self-questioning self-relation. While acknowledging the critique of (naturally given, primary) identity that modernism performs as part and parcel of its critique of representation, I argue that modernism's problematisation of identity is inseparable from an articulation of the *question* of identity, the question of *who* comes after the critique of identity, of what forms of self-definition are opened up to modern subjects who bear the capacity to put all given identities in question. In their attention to the breakdown of the self-conceptions that human beings take on, I argue, modernist works make

[63] Irving Howe, "The Idea of the Modern," in Howe, ed., *Literary Modernism*, 34 (cited in Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*, 37).

available to those who encounter them a reflection upon the fragility of all self-conceptions, and solicit the responsibility of acknowledging the perpetual openness of our ways of defining ourselves to failure or misrecognition.

No phrase offers a more incisive statement of a modern literature's problematisation of identity than Arthur Rimbaud's "Je est un autre." As readers from Sartre to Jacques Lacan have suggested, Rimbaud's phrase indicates that the 'I' that is named is never identical with a prior self that names it, but that the 'I' is 'other', an object or image through which an imaginary, specular unity is claimed.[64] But in light of the argument developed above, I mean to suggest that the internal difference pointed to by Rimbaud's phrase is the very condition of self-relation, as a temporal and fragile *living activity* of responding to one's experience and situating oneself in relation to it. It is only someone who can say "I is another" who can ask, "Who am I?" More precisely, the statement "I is another" both *implies* the question, "Who am I?", and makes possible the articulation of a provisional answer to that question. For the recognition that the "I" is an object of consciousness, that it is never simply identical with the thought that says "I," does not lead to the dissolution of the "I" or to its reduction to a non-question, to a philosophical error. The recognition that "I is another" does not leave consciousness free to roam in some primary impersonality, for even a statement that rejects the "I" as a fiction is the statement *of* an "I," the statement of one who *takes themselves to be making this statement*, and who thus takes themselves to be an "I," to be *someone*. This does not mean there is anything 'mistaken' in Rimbaud's phrase; rather, it means that its insight is nothing other than proper to the genuine thinking of identity, as the revelation that I am never finally or simply identical with the images I (or others) have of myself. It is because of this

[64] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (Hill and Wang, 1960), 97-8. Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (The MIT Press, 2007), 14-5.

constitutive non-identity in the sense of self-sameness that I can ask myself the question of who I am and who I can be. The most rigorous and committed critique of the notion of identity cannot fail to assert the identity of the one who comes after this critique, who knows themselves to have carried out this critique – for there is no critique without the self-consciousness of one who takes themselves to have made it. This dissertation takes up this question of *who* comes after the critique of the self, a critique that is performed not to the end of self-dissolution, but to that of a redetermination of ourselves.[65]

9. Identity Out of Place

The three chapters of this dissertation engage in such a redetermination of the question of identity, through readings of some key works of modernist narrative art in France in which the problematisation of identity is crucially at stake, at once as a question of fictional content and of aesthetic form.

Chapter One turns to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a work whose status as an ur-text of modernism is intimately tied to the ironic perspective it takes towards its characters' efforts to announce and perform identity. In the particular tension it presents between an unresponsive world and the self-conceptions through which these characters seek and fail to make contact with it, Flaubert's novel grants literature the power to reframe human action by divesting it of mastery over itself, undermining the meanings it gives itself. Yet while many critics – most significantly, Rancière – have argued that *Madame Bovary* has as its essential end or lesson the virtue of the dissolution of identity, I argue that the novel's very attention to how

[65] I return to a discussion of Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" in Chapter Three, in the context of the phrase's revised appearance in Godard's *Vivre sa vie*.

individuals can go wrong in the self-conceptions they cultivate opens up to its readers the possibility of a deepening of reflection upon the kinds of self-conceptions we take on, and on the modern conditions which provoke deficient and damaging modes of identification. *Madame Bovary* shows the failings of a *particular* way of taking up the question of identity, one which the bourgeois world of the novel solicits in its characters: namely, identity as an inert, objectified self-image, through which the individual staves off recognition of their living, temporal, and social existence. This damaged and self-undermining form of self-conception is presented dramatically in the character of Emma Bovary, and comically in the minor, weaker figures of Homais and Rodolphe. Flaubert's novel makes available to critical reflection the reality of a damaging social world which leads individuals to take on identities or self-conceptions in order to retreat from life, and the novel's essential irony entails cultivating readers' awareness of the failure of these modes of identity to provide a coherent experience of the world.

Chapter Two considers Beckett's *Fin de partie* / *Endgame* as a work which pursues this same tension between performative self-conception and an indifferent and unresponsive world, in a newly severe manner. If Flaubert presents a 'full' sensuous world to which his characters fail to respond in their self-enclosed self-conceptions, Beckett presents a world almost entirely emptied out, whose diminished state fails to provoke even the gross misconceptions of Flaubert's characters, its desolation appearing to offer nothing for human perception and action to get either right or wrong. Personhood, in this context, appears reduced to sheer habit, and to a grotesque performance of tics and repartée, as hollow attempts at finding relief from the degradation of the body and the world. But, as I show, the play's rendering of the failings of the identities its characters cling to in the face of a decaying world opens up a space of reflection upon the *refusal of life* that is sought in these

performances of identity. Beckett's play takes this notion of the refusal of life to its most extreme point, by presenting characters who long for and can never attain a final 'ending': they wish to die, but cannot, because death would prevent them from experiencing the end of everything. Through the master/slave, father/son dynamic between its central characters, Hamm and Clov, *Fin de partie* explores how this refusal of life is embedded in certain interpersonal relations, and shows the self-undermining deficiency of the attitude of mastery, expressed through Hamm's perpetual need for Clov's recognition of his sovereignty. Life, and the sense-making activity of human perception and action, renew themselves, in spite of everything, in Beckett's play, which brings out the pathos of a mode of self-conception whose need for finality and mastery leads it to deny its own condition as *living*. Drawing on Beckett's famous appeal to "failing better," I argue that *Fin de partie* critically presents the failure of a mode of identity that believes in the possibility of 'success,' of a self that would stand over one's actions and one's experience. 'Failing better,' by contrast, involves living and acting in recognition that no way of being or performing oneself ever 'succeeds' in achieving an identity in the form of stasis or permanence, together with the recognition that one cannot *not* act, cannot not take up an identity as an activity of cohering the world and responding to the unpredictability it brings, in even the most deprived and habitual of settings.

Chapter Three looks to how cinema renews and reframes the modernist problematisation of identity, through a reading of Godard's film *Vivre sa vie*. The Flaubertian tension between human meanings and a world that neglects to respond to them is amplified by the very nature of cinema, which, as Stanley Cavell suggests, shows "the world viewed" as a world from which human centrality is absent. Godard's film accentuates this cinematic condition through an episodic structure and shifting stylistic register which continually

corrodes the presumed centrality of its protagonist, Nana, who, like Emma Bovary, faces the difficulty of confronting a world that does not offer the assured identity and recognition of a character in a novel or a film. Nana's direct renunciation of identity is tied to her situation as a woman defined through men's desire, and her entry into sex work is presented as an effort to achieve such self-dissolution, through an indifferent acceptance of a male desire for possession. I engage critically with readers including Susan Sontag, Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, who have seen in this trajectory, and in the film's episodic and formally shifting disruption of narrative logic, an endorsement of self-dissolution, ultimately accomplished in the death that meets Nana at the end of the film. I show instead that both Nana's affirmation of self-dissolution and her desire to be recognised as "special" express an aborted effort to take up her life, under conditions in which every identity available to her as a woman is defined in terms of another's desire to possess her – a desire which is itself self-undermining, as the temporal condition of life is inimical to possession. In presenting the complementary dissatisfactions of these life-denying responses to the question of identity, the film engages in a critical reflection upon a social world that offers only fantasies of ideal and permanent 'specialness' or stoic acceptance of self-destruction to subjects who have no *livable* way of identifying themselves.

My account of how identity has come to be opposed to life, and of how a modernist narrative art takes up this tension in its unmaking of a representational picture of a world that would be identified and mastered by a disembodied and unliving knowledge, is developed in continual dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, drawing particularly on his thesis of the primacy of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no primary realm of immediate sensory experience *prior to* the living, receptive activity of perception.[66] Perception, as an ongoing

[66] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 3-12.

activity of relating to our experience and working to situate ourselves in the world in light of this experience, is the path through which the dualisms of activity and passivity, experience and reflection, identity and non-identity, are overcome. To perceive is both to be receptive to a world that goes beyond one's knowledge and to cohere what one perceives into a meaningful form. Perception is thus both essentially self-conscious and essentially open to an outside that challenges its centredness. What Merleau-Ponty calls a renewal of perception as a reminder of our unbreakable bond with the world can then be understood as a reminder that identity, as a self-relation and a self-conception, is both constitutive and constitutively out of place, as an ongoing activity of situating ourselves in this world. Escaping identity is as impossible and incoherent a notion as escaping perception.

10. Identity and Genericity

In his study of Beckett, Alain Badiou argues that, rather than expressing despair at a world deprived of all meaning and hope, Beckett's works engage in a "writing of the generic," a study of "generic humanity." In adhering to "a severe principle of economy" in his writing, Beckett seeks the "few principal functions" governing human life, once the "complexity of experience" and the "inessential attributes" through which we are used to defining and situating individuals are reduced to the most basic of conditions and situations.[67] Commentators on this text have not, to my knowledge, taken note of the fact that in appealing to this notion of the generic in his reading of Beckett, Badiou is evoking the infamous notion of *Gattungswesen* from Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844 – a term which, while known in English as "species-being," has most commonly been translated into

[67] Alain Badiou, "The Writing of the Generic," trans. Bruno Bosteels, in Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Clinamen, 2003), 1-36: 2-3.

French as *être générique*.[68] For Marx, the proletariat embodies both the deprivation and the possibility of humanity as a 'generic being.' Proletarian workers embody this generic being of humanity, firstly owing to their lack of any positive identity, any status that would tie them to a capitalist society which can only treat them as a thing, an object that must labour in estrangement from any ends of its own. The *possibility* entailed in this generic condition emerges from the fact that this condition makes it possible to ask the question of who we are and what we want to live for. While the proletariat is prevented from responding freely to the force of this question under conditions in which they must carry out what Marx calls estranged labour in order to survive, their lack of a positive status as a subject *within* capitalist society grants them the capacity to pose this question, rather than remaining tied to any particular identity within this society.

Only one character in the works studied in this dissertation – Godard's Nana, in *Vivre sa vie* – is recognisably proletarian, and I do not treat these works as in any straightforward sense 'about' or fundamentally preoccupied with a capitalist condition and lifeworld. In approaching them as engagements with a modern condition in which identity is problematised and open to question, I seek to show how these works respond to the 'generic being' which capitalist conditions made thinkable in Marx's time. What Marx's analysis of the proletarian condition shows is that the reduction of a subject to a lack of status, a lack of recognised identity, does not produce the disappearance of the question of identity, but the restatement of the question at the level of humanity as such: who are *we* to be, what are we to affirm as proper to the ways we can justify living, once 'we' is taken to mean humanity as

[68] Badiou comments on the significance of Marx's notion of 'generic being' for his own thought, in Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, *German Philosophy: A Dialogue*, trans. Richard Lambert (The MIT Press, 2018), 39-40. On the importance of the Marxian notion of the generic for Badiou's philosophy in contexts other than that of his work on Beckett, see Bruno Bosteels, "The Fate of the Generic: Marx With Badiou," in Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte, eds., *(Mis)Readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 211-226.

such, or in other words, all who are able to ask themselves this question? This question is only accessible to those who have confronted their 'generic being,' the non-fixity and fragility of any particular identity they hold or desire to hold. Beyond the search for a self-sufficient identity that would overcome this fragility by proclaiming its own independent mastery or inertia, the works studied in this dissertation open the question of how identity may be affirmed and practiced by those who recognise their own dependence on their social and natural bonds, who do not seek in identity an escape from necessity, from material, social and natural life, but a way of living it. Commitment to this question is, in words Merleau-Ponty devoted to Marx's Manuscripts, "a matter of understanding that the bond which attaches man to the world is at the same time his way to freedom; of seeing how man, in contact with nature, projects the instruments of his liberation around himself not by destroying necessity but, on the contrary, by utilizing it."[69]

[69] Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism and Philosophy," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 130.

Chapter One

The Subject of Disidentification in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

1. Out of Place, Out of Time: Flaubert's Modernism

Nothing ever happens on time in *Madame Bovary*. When a cannon goes off to announce the arrival of a government prefect at the local agricultural fair, the Comices Agricoles, we are told: "C'était une fausse alerte. M. le préfet n'arrivait pas; et les membres du jury se trouvaient fort embarrassés, ne sachant s'il fallait commencer la séance ou bien attendre encore."[1] Even Emma Bovary's death fails to come at the expected time: following the abrupt, brutal moment at which she takes the arsenic that will kill her (a moment in which we receive no indications of her inner state), Emma—and the reader—must wait for the poison to take effect. In what she believes to be her last *beau geste*, Emma kisses the crucifix held out by her priest: "elle y déposa de toute sa force expirante le plus grand baiser d'amour qu'elle eût jamais donné."[2] But death does not come at this 'appropriate' moment: instead, she goes on living long enough to experience the horror of a blind beggar's song coming from the street, whose ugliness replaces the beauty which she had wanted to be the setting for her death.

Similarly, what might ordinarily be thought of as the dramatically significant events of the novel are shown out of focus, or at a distance, failing to provide the clarity and unity a reader might have expected. Rodolphe's seduction of Emma at the Comices Agricoles, already spoiled in advance for the reader upon discovering that he is a vain and insincere

[1] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary, mœurs de province* (Flammarion, 2014), 206.
"It was a false alarm. Monsieur le Préfet did not arrive; and the members of the jury were most embarrassed, not knowing whether to begin the session or else wait longer." Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Morals*, trans. Adam Thorpe (Vintage, 2011), 132.
[2] Ibid., 399. " . . . she planted there with all her expiring force the most intense kiss of love that she had ever given" (309).

lothario, is almost drowned out by the tedious official speeches, when a counsellor finally does show up in place of the missing Monsieur le Préfet. Bolder still is Flaubert's depiction of the consummation of Emma and Léon's affair, at the end of Chapter I of Part III: here, as the budding lovers step into a fiacre, the narrative perspective retreats to an external view, describing in detached, objective detail the random movements of the vehicle across the streets of Rouen. The reader is led to understand what is happening inside the cab, even as the narration renders the characters themselves anonymous and distant as soon as they enter it (when Emma finally steps out at the end of the chapter, she is referred to anonymously by the narration as "une femme"). The driver is called to keep moving, in no particular direction, by "une voix qui sortait de l'intérieur" (a voice which we understand to be Léon's), and the scene finds its crescendo in a dizzying description of the itinerary of the "lourde machine," disconnected from any narrative logic:

> Elle [*la lourde machine*] revint; et alors, sans parti pris ni direction, au hasard, elle vagabonda. On la vit à Saint-Pol, à Lescure, au mont Gargan, à la Rouge-Mare, et place du Gaillard-bois; rue Maladrerie, rue Dinanderie, devant Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise,—devant la Douane,—à la basse Vieille-Tour, aux Trois-Pipes et au Cimetière Monumental. (317)[3]

While offering an ironic gesture of decorum by regarding the vehicle from the outside (though the scene's implied sexual content was sufficiently apparent that the editors of the *Revue de Paris* excised it from their original publication of the novel), the narration of this scene also accomplishes an exemplarily Flaubertian reversal. Suddenly we are no longer immersed in the world of the characters and their private drama, which is replaced by the public list of locations in Rouen passed through by their vehicle. This scene—which anticipates the cartographic fixation on spatial detail of much high modernism, such as James

[3] Ibid., 317. "It returned; and then, with neither decision nor direction, haphazardly, it roved. It was seen at Saint-Pol, at Lescure, at Mont Gargan, at La Rouge-Mare, and the Place du Gaillard-Bois; rue Maladrerie, rue Dinanderie, in front of Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise—before the Customs House—at the Basse-Vieille-Tour, at the Trois-Pipes and the Monumental Cemetery" (234).

Joyce's *Ulysses*—can be read as a model of modernist abstraction, as the reader's attention is drawn away from the fictional drama itself and towards the contingency of objects and events, which are, from this more detached perspective, shown to be no more meaningfully connected than two city landmarks which happen to be passed by on a cab ride.

2. Literature and Disidentification

But what is the conclusion solicited by this distancing of the reader from the narrative action and the inner world of the characters? Jonathan Culler provides an account of Flaubert's work which emphasises this breakdown of identification as central to his art, suggesting (following a remark of the author himself in a letter of his youth) that Flaubert "demoralizes" his readers by deliberately failing to make the fictional world of his novels cohere into a meaningful whole.[4] In this sense, an essential function of Flaubert's writing can be understood to be that of *disidentification*: his texts' ironic abstraction works to deflate the reader's capacity to *identify* the depicted world and the elements within it, in a way which correspondingly puts in question this reader's capacity to identify and cohere *themselves* as a subject who interprets and understands this world, taking up a stable place in relation to it.[5] Disidentification, in this sense, operates both at the level of the object and that of the subject, with regard to both the coherence of the depicted world and the unity of the subject charged with assembling this world into an order. As the identity of the depicted world is brought into question, so too is the reader's sense of their own coherence as a subject of experience and interpretation, provoking what Culler calls the reader's "demoralization."

[4] Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 116.
[5] On this, see especially Chapter Two of Culler, 59-152.

In this chapter, I want to complicate this understanding of Flaubert as an artist of disidentification, while acknowledging and drawing upon many of its insights. A crucial effect of Flaubert's work is how it challenges a reader's sense of the order and coherence of the depicted world, putting the identities through which we ordinarily experience the seemingly familiar world radically into question. What I mean to problematise, however, is the idea that disidentification is, or could ever be, the *end* of Flaubert's art, or of any art. The questioning of identity cannot end in disidentification, since this would leave no one as the subject of this questioning. A modernist art's problematisation of the identities at stake in any depiction of the world, by self-reflexively engaging the question of the conditions of art's own production, does not produce a breakdown of identity as such, but allows a space for critical self-reflection by a reader upon the world and upon themselves, by opening them up to an engagement with the contingency and revisability of the modes of perceiving, interpreting, and acting to which they have been habituated. This is the more dialectical reading of *Madame Bovary* I wish to articulate: in light of Culler's work, I argue that every demoralisation contains the seeds of a *remoralisation*, in light of literature's questioning of our existing ways of engaging with the world and ourselves.

3. Rancière: Sensation and Impersonality

The theorist who has placed greatest emphasis on *Madame Bovary* as a novel of disidentification is Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, *Madame Bovary* is a foundational work of what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. Within the aesthetic regime of art, "[t]here are no noble or ignoble subjects."[6] Hierarchies as to who can be represented in what way and

[6] Jacques Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed," *Critical Inquiry*, No. 34, Winter, 2008, 233-48: 237.

through what representational codes are broken down, and an "equality of indifference" is upheld towards represented subject matter, such that any content is the potential basis for art, thus constituting "the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content."[7] *Madame Bovary*, as the apparently insignificant story of the life of a farmer's daughter turned wife to a mediocre country doctor, is for Rancière a paradigmatic case of this equality of indifference established by the aesthetic regime of art.

On Rancière's account, it is through this indifference towards content – in the idea that anything and anyone is as worthy a subject of artistic treatment as any other – that Flaubert participates in the democracy of literature, as opposed to the entrenched hierarchies of representation proper to the history of *belles lettres* or the "representational regime of art." For Rancière, this literary democracy amounts to a dissolution of the individual as a subject, into the sheer indifference of sensuous experience that belongs to no one. This argument is at the heart of his major text on *Madame Bovary*, and is a recurring concern throughout his work on both aesthetics and politics. For Rancière, Emma Bovary's great mistake is to treat herself as "a personal subject, pursuing individual aims."[8] It is the author, Flaubert, who finds the correct expression for the "equality of affects," by rendering this equality in the form of a book, detached from life and from the subjective pursuit of "individual aims."[9] The author puts into his book "a pure harmony of sensations, disconnected from any function and any story, from any personal feeling and any property of things," while the character tries and fails to make the radical availability of all experience into a story of her own happiness through possession.[10] The "absolute manner of seeing things" advocated by Flaubert is one in

[7] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 14.
[8] Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary," 241.
[9] *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 56.
[10] "Why Emma Bovary," 241.

which "they are released from all the ties that make them useful or desirable objects. It is the manner of enjoying sensations as pure sensations, disconnected from the sensorium of ordinary experience."[11] In contrasting Emma's desire for possession with his own novelistic style of dwelling in the infinite play of sensations which belong to no one, Flaubert, on Rancière's reading, offers to an attentive reader the abandonment of identity as the ultimate affirmation of the destabilising and liberating adventure of a world in which identities are not fixed in place by any order.

If Flaubert had no personal affinity for political democracy, Rancière observes, his commitment to literature is nonetheless a commitment to an "literary equality" as an "equality of affects."[12] This is not an equality of individuals to be the individuals they are, but an equality of sensory experiences which disrupt the identities assumed by individuals. By opening every facet of the sensible world to representation, literature dissolves the identities through which individuals are unequally constituted, disrupting the "distribution of the sensible" which apportions distinct possibilities for experience to individuals according to their distinct identities. By making every experience available to every person, literature also dissolves every identity into the unending, indifferent play of sensations.

Rancière's reading of Flaubert is transformative in moving away from understandings of his work as anti-democratic and misanthropic, by showing how Flaubert's commitment to the disidentifying power of art bears a democratic kernel in its participation in the aesthetic revolution's redefinition of art in terms of its "adherence to a specific regime of the sensible," where the sensible is "extricated from its ordinary connections," and "inhabited by a

[11] Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary," 241.
[12] Ibid., 238.

heterogeneous power," a power irreducible to any intentionality.[13] In this, Rancière shows Flaubert's participation in the aesthetic regime's opening up of a space for art that is both beyond utility and beyond the conventions of appropriate representation. Yet one finds in certain texts of Rancière's, and most strikingly in his main essay on *Madame Bovary*, a tendency to treat the disidentification of art and the abandonment of the self as an *ethic*, as a desirable goal in itself. In his text on *Madame Bovary* and elsewhere, Rancière holds out the abandonment of every project of the self through the "happiness" of surrendering to the sensuous present and the indifference of the "equality of affects" as the true response to the violent imposition of identity.[14]

This solution, however, offers no conception of what would be instituted by such an interruption, or who the subject of this transformation could possibly be. Rather, it conceives of the break from assigned identity as an abandonment of selfhood altogether.[15] The literary equality of the abandonment of identity has a negative, interruptive value in Rancière's reading of Flaubert: the only way to experience happiness is by abandoning the self as a subject of experience and desire. Happiness is found only in the pure, disinterested experience of Deleuzian "haecceities," as "an eternal flood of atoms that keeps doing and undoing in new configurations."[16] Literature "releases those haecceities from the chains of individualization and objectification," by showing the equality and exchangeability between

[13] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22-23.
[14] See in particular the chapter on Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* in *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 39-55, especially 43.
[15] While it is beyond the bounds of this chapter to consider the extent to which an abandonment of self is characteristic of Rancière's work more broadly, it can be noted that in his major political work, *La Mésentente* (*Disagreement*), Rancière does offer a notion of a "subject" and "subjectification" in positive distinction from "identity." But I would argue that the subject here retains a negative definition, with subjectification conceived of as the destabilizing refusal of an assigned identity by a group that declares its equality and so disrupts the fixed inequality upon which the fantasy of social order is founded. The argument made here about the need to think an ongoing dynamic of identity and disidentification could thus be further developed in relation to Rancière's account of politics.
[16] "Why Emma Bovary," 243.

any experience and any other, as all equally available to aestheticisation.[17] The aesthetic is in this sense intrinsically impersonal, since to enjoy a sensory experience purely for what it is means relinquishing one's personal projects, attachments and desires towards objects of experience.

This abandonment of self, however, can never be achieved as a living state, which is why it only operates as a negative ideal in Rancière's evocations of it. The abandonment of the identitarian projects to which the individual has been committed requires that there be an individual subject of this abandonment who says to themselves: *I am abandoning my project and myself*. If I were not there to remind myself that I have abandoned myself, this abandonment would be experienced by no one, and there would be no coherent sense in which it could be said to have taken place at all. Rancière's conception of the aesthetic as fundamentally and conclusively disidentifying rests on the idea that there can be an experience of the sensuous present without an individual who takes up a relationship to that experience as their own; yet his own examples show that the abandonment of a certain identity is inseparable from a subjective positionality, in which one begins to articulate *another* identity, another self-conception, in distinction from the one by which they have previously been defined. In offering disidentification as the essential work performed by art, Rancière offers a negative and ruptural conception of the self, according to which true experience dissolves identities and belongs to no one. As such, this true experience is not an experience at all.

[17] "Literature . . . releases those haecceities from the chains of individualization and objectification" (Ibid., 243). In drawing the notion of haecceities from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Rancière does not necessarily affirm the empiricist ontology underlying it in Deleuze's own work, but this text suggests that Rancière does share with Deleuze a valorisation of *disidentification* as itself the end or goal of aesthetic experience.

4. Emma Bovary and the Dialectic of Identity and Disidentification

Overcoming this impasse requires accounting for disidentification as the activity of someone who is engaged in the question of defining themselves *differently*, rather than as an abandonment of all definition. The experience of identity's failure can only make sense as a negative moment in a process by which an individual engages in the *question* of self-definition.[18] Emma Bovary's error should then be understood not as the error of wanting and committing to an identity altogether, but rather as the error of conceiving of her identity *in a particular way*. Time and again throughout the novel, both Emma and other characters are shown to cling to an identity as a *self-image*, a fixed and atemporal conception of oneself that would be guaranteed by some property, thanks to which the individual would be relieved from the responsibility and uncertainty of *living*. Flaubert's characters cling to an image of themselves, to an external guarantee of who they are, while his narration undermines these self-images by showing how they conflict with the concrete, practical ways in which these characters actually live. From Léon and Emma's belief that if they read the right books and

[18] In describing disidentification as *negative* I do not mean that it is necessarily experienced as undesirable by the individual: there can of course be an exhilaration and liberation in such experiences, which Rancière's work leads us to think about. Flaubert himself provides a powerful expression of the liberation from a fixed identity of the self through writing, suggesting in a letter to Louise Colet: "N'importe, bien ou mal, c'est une délicieuse chose que d'écrire, que de ne plus être *soi*, mais de circuler dans toute la création dont on parle." [Flaubert, *Correspondance: Deuxième Série, 1850–1854* (Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1894), 359.] I rather use the term *negative* in a strictly formal sense, to indicate that disidentification entails the *loss* or privation of something (that is, here, of a recognised self). In suggesting that disidentification amounts to a negative moment in a dialectical process, I do not mean that experiences such as the one Flaubert describes here are somehow interrupted or failed, or that explicit positive assertions of identity are morally or experientially "better" than assertions of non-identity; my claim, rather, is that these experiences themselves have to be understood dialectically in order to do justice to them. When Flaubert expresses this exhilaration at no longer being himself in the experience of writing and immersing himself in the world of artistic creation, there is at stake both the identity or self that is rejected, and the subject of this disidentification, who rejects this identity and experiences this elation, and knows himself to be doing so. The pleasure in self-abandonment Flaubert expresses here is comprehensible only as the activity of someone who is committed to defining themselves through this activity as different from how they have otherwise been defined. Such self-definition can remain implicit, and one may find immersion in a creative activity without explicit self-reflection more liberating than those activities in which one is explicitly reminded of one's socially instituted identity; but in order to feel and express this liberation, as Flaubert does in this letter, an implicit, alternative notion of oneself has to be at work, and this experience and this expression are forms of self-maintenance in which the elation of self-abandonment through creative endeavour is articulated as an experience one is having.

use the right words they will be as authentic and passionate as a romantic hero and heroine, to Rodolphe's cultivation of the self-image of a lothario—an image that interests him far more than any of the women he seduces ("'moi qui adore les femmes pâles!'"[19], he declares to himself in reflecting on his pursuit of Emma)—to Homais' officious and self-important declarations about himself as a man of science and progress even as he consistently fails to understand the events taking place around him, *Madame Bovary* offers instance after instance of characters retreating into an identity as an ideal state that they believe can save them from the indeterminacy of themselves and the world. Whereas Rancière characterises Emma's disappointments as signs of the failure of identity as such, I argue that we can grasp the dynamics of the novel more fully if we see how the characters repeatedly fall into a particular conception of identity as an ideal and externalised image of the self. The conflict between such self-images and the actual life-activity of these characters that Flaubert presents works by establishing a dynamic tension between these two facets of a person: how one lives, and who one is. The response that the novel allows us to formulate is not to abandon this tension, but to find a way of owning it, instead of fleeing from it into fantasies of perfect self-identity, as Flaubert's characters do.

Emma's own ultimate answer to the dissatisfactions of her identity is, of course, suicide. Her first suicidal thoughts, upon reading Rodolphe's letter ending their affair while standing at her attic window, arrive in the midst of what is perhaps the most "Rancièrean" passage in the novel, as the concerns of the individual are overwhelmed by the sensorium of the perceived world:

> En face, par-dessus les toits, la pleine campagne s'étalait à perte de vue. En bas, sous elle, la place du village était vide; les cailloux du trottoir scintillaient, les girouettes des maisons se tenaient immobiles; au coin de la rue, il partit d'un étage inférieur une sorte de ronflement à modulations stridentes. C'était Binet qui tournait.

[19] *Madame Bovary*, 197. "'I, who adore pale women!'" (124)

> Elle s'était appuyée contre l'embrasure de la mansarde, et elle relisait la lettre avec des ricanements de colère. [. . .] Elle jetait les yeux tout autour d'elle avec l'envie que la terre croulât. Pourquoi n'en pas finir? Qui la retenait donc? Elle était libre. Et elle s'avança, elle regarda les pavés en se disant:
>
> — Allons ! allons !
>
> Le rayon lumineux qui montait d'en bas directement tirait vers l'abîme le poids de son corps. Il lui semblait que le sol de la place oscillant s'élevait le long des murs, et que le plancher s'inclinait par le bout, à la manière d'un vaisseau qui tangue. Elle se tenait tout au bord, presque suspendue, entourée d'un grand espace. Le bleu du ciel l'envahissait, l'air circulait dans sa tête creuse, elle n'avait qu'à céder, qu'à se laisser prendre; et le ronflement du tour ne discontinuait pas, comme une voix furieuse qui l'appelait.
>
> — Ma femme ! ma femme ! cria Charles.
>
> Elle s'arrêta.[20]

This scene appears to offer the ideal aesthetic dissolution of individuality that Rancière sees as the key to *Madame Bovary*: Emma begins to lose all sense of self and of her fixed place in the world, such that she desires that the earth crumble; she is free from the constraints of identity imposed by others ("Qui la retenait donc? Elle était libre"), and she opens herself fully to a world of sensory impressions ("Le bleu du ciel l'envahissait") which lose both their distinction ("Il lui semblait que le sol de la place oscillant s'élevait le long des murs, et que le plancher s'inclinait par le bout") and their tethering to any stable referent (it is only as a secondary thought that the "ronflement" she hears is attributed to an identifiable sound with a comprehensible source—Binet working at his lathe—and this sound will subsequently be converted into a message divorced from that original referent, becoming a voice that calls Emma to give up her identity by jumping). The problem with interpreting such a moment as

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[20] *Madame Bovary*, 273-74.

"Opposite, over the rooves, the open fields stretched away as far as the eye could see. Below, directly beneath her, the village square was empty; the pavement's flints glittered, the weather-cocks were stilled; at the corner of the street, a sort of humming emanated from a lower floor in screaking variations of key. It was Binet turning his lathe.

She had supported herself on the window's embrasure, and she was reading the letter again with snickers of rage. [. . .] She cast her eyes all about, wanting the world to collapse. Why not be finished with it? So what was holding her back? She was free. And she stepped forward, looked at the paving stones, and said to herself:

'Go on! Go on!'

The luminous beam that came up directly from below tugged her body's weight towards the abyss. It seemed to her that the square's rocking ground was rising up along the walls, and that the floor was tilting at one end, in the way a ship pitches. She held on right at the edge, almost hanging, surrounded by a great space. The blue of the sky overran her, the air flowed round inside her hollow head, she had but to give in, to allow herself to be taken; and the lathe's humming did not let up, like a mad voice calling her.

'Wife! Wife!' cried Charles.

She stopped." (194-95)

liberatory, however, is that the achievement of this dissolution of identity is death: the same death that will annihilate all experience. When she is called back from this entrancing dissolution of all distinction, it is by Charles, who interpellates her as "Ma femme": she is recalled to her identity as Madame Bovary, as a (mediocre) title, as an existence for others. If identity offers only such misrecognition, the dissolution of identity in death may be seen as the only solution.

The abandonment of self as a living project is an incoherent one, since its only possible result is an act of suicide and the end of all experience. While Rancière reads Emma's death at the end of the novel as Flaubert's punishment of her for failing to heed the lesson of the abandonment of identity, we can better understand her suicide as an expression of the tension between the image and the practice of identity—who she thinks she is and how she actually lives—that she is unable to answer in a way she can affirm and sustain. If she truly could abandon identity while continuing to live, she would not kill herself: it is rather the knowledge that, no matter what she does, *she* will always be there, with a take on her own activity and a sense of who she is or who she is supposed to be, that becomes unbearable for her. Rather than offering the success of the writer in opposition to the failure of the character, Emma's death poses a question *to the reader*: what is it that produces this hopeless conflict between the identity one wants to have and the way that one actually lives; and what would it mean for this relationship to be negotiated differently? It is this dual question that is most crucially at stake in the novel's centerpiece, the scene at the Comices Agricoles.

5. Body or Soul: The Comices Agricoles and the Antinomies of Identity

Flaubert considered the scene of the Comices Agricoles one of the most original and most

difficult to achieve in the novel, suggesting in a letter to Louise Colet during the writing process that "[s]i jamais les effets d'une symphonie ont été reportés dans un livre, ce sera là."[21] Featuring most of the novel's principal characters, this scene attains what Flaubert calls a symphonic effect through the often sharp juxtaposition of one character's speech and another's, moving between details of the scene in a construction of the whole. Georg Lukács, in his influential essay "Narrate or Describe?", compares the Comices Agricoles scene not to music, but to painting: on his account, the human characters present in this scene become mere "dabs of color in a painting," acting not as practical agents in the world but as "nothing but observers of this setting."[22] In comparing it alternately to the arts of music and painting, Flaubert and Lukács both highlight a synthetic quality to the scene which brings together into a static unity elements which would traditionally be related through the dynamic process of a *narrative*, of a sequence of events driven by the action of the characters. The many instruments playing together in a symphony, or the dabs of colour cohering into the unity of a painting, render the work a totality greater than its parts, and Flaubert seeks to achieve such an effect within a work of literature. Instead of soliciting absorption in the human situation of narrative events, the sequence draws the reader to attend to the construction of the whole, to how the whole hangs together. It is this detachment of focus from the depicted world as its participants understand themselves towards a meta-reflection upon this world's construction which invites a reading of the scene as a model of modernist disidentification.

Yet the Comices scene offers a reflection upon identity that complicates attempts to read it purely in terms of disidentification and detachment. Construction and artificiality are at stake not only on this meta-reflective level, but within the depicted events of the scene

[21] Flaubert, *Écrire Madame Bovary: Lettres, pages manuscrites, extraits*, ed. Geneviève Winter (Gallimard, 2009), 113.
[22] Georg Lukács, "Narrate Or Describe?", in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: The Merlin Press, 1970), 115.

itself, in the form through which social interaction and the self-constitution of individuals are enacted. Readers who stress the estrangement and disidentification at work in the sequence emphasise the function of irony in its treatment of the narrative action. When Lukács writes that "[t]he painting assumes an importance which does not arise out of the subjective importance of the events," he means that the true "importance" conveyed by Flaubert to the reader is that of an ironic treatment of the characters and their social world.[23] This irony is established through the juxtaposition between the central narrative development of the chapter – Rodolphe's seduction of Emma – and the seemingly incidental events of the fair itself, most notably the interminable speeches given by the visiting officials. As Lukács observes, "by interweaving and counterposing official speeches with fragments of love dialogue, [Flaubert] offers an ironic juxtaposition of the public and private banality of the petty bourgeoisie."[24] Vladimir Nabokov, also applying the analogy to painting, makes a similar observation, suggesting that, "if the official speeches are stale 'journalese,' the romantic conversation between Rodolphe and Emma is stale 'romantese.' The whole beauty of the thing is that it is not good and evil interrupting each other, but one kind of evil intermingled with another kind of evil. As Flaubert remarked, he paints color on color."[25] As these readers point out, an ironic effect of this juxtaposition is to reveal an artificiality and falseness beneath the superficially heartfelt words of the lovers, thus revealing the "banality" of this social world as a whole.

But there is more at stake in the Comices scene's treatment of identity than these accounts suggest: through its ironic perspective upon the falseness of every character's performance of identity, and upon the larger social world that solicits this falseness, the scene

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 157.

once again reveals the trappings of a certain *life-denying* way of conceiving of identity. By showing that these characters provide the *wrong* answers to the tension constitutive of identity, the scene implicitly opens up the question of how it could be responded to differently. The high-point of the scene is in the juxtaposition of the Conseiller M. Lieuvain's speech celebrating the region's agricultural achievements to Rodolphe's hackneyed words of love spoken to Emma, a juxtaposition which achieves its irony through the surprising similarity it reveals between these two superficially opposed discourses. While this similarity has often been understood solely with regard to the pomposity and (in Nabokov's terms) staleness of both Lieuvain and Rodolphe's words and performances, the staleness in question has to do, more fundamentally, with their shared *devaluing* of life through the abstract ideals they venerate: cultural progress for Lieuvain, and the romantic communion of uniquely fated souls for Rodolphe. Both Lieuvain and Rodolphe venerate these ideals *above* the material life of human beings, and in so doing they refuse the self-conscious relationship *to* one's own material life that could constitute a form of identity able to respond to the failings treated by Flaubert's novel with such exemplary irony.

The agricultural fair is a celebration of the *cultivation* of the land and the raising of livestock through the ingenuity and industriousness of the French people. This celebration, as Lieuvain stresses, is a celebration of *progress*, the progress of civilisation and of the French nation, through the collective labour of the people: "'Vous, agriculteurs et ouvriers des campagnes; vous, pionniers pacifiques d'une œuvre toute de civilisation! vous, hommes de progrès et de moralité!'"[26] This cult of progress is a central object of Flaubert's satire in the novel, focused particularly on the figure of Homais (described by Stephen Heath as a

[26] *Madame Bovary*, 210. "'You, farmers and workers of the fields; you peaceful pioneers of a wholly civilised labor! You men of progress and morality!'" (136)

"paragon of the bourgeois and voice of (its) progress"), and brought out in the terrible episode of Charles' botched operation on Hippolyte, the club-footed servant, under Homais' insistence.[27]

> [Homais] avait lu dernièrement l'éloge d'une nouvelle méthode pour la cure des pieds-bots; et comme il était partisan du progrès, il conçut cette idée patriotique que Yonville, pour *se mettre au niveau*, devait avoir des opérations de stréphopodie.[28]

Progress is conceived of by Homais, as by Lieuvain, as an abstract good which unites the people in their quest to achieve it: Hyppolite's club foot presents the town of Yonville with an opportunity to prove its worth by contributing to the progress of France, making the Yonvillois like those good agriculturalists and labourers appealed to by Lieuvain, all contributing to the progress of the great whole that is the nation. What Flaubert satirises in this concept of progress – very much tied to his well-known derision of the bourgeois – is its vain emptiness as an ideal: everyone participates in this universal progress, each individual finds their purpose in contributing to it; yet this progress can only be spoken of in platitudes, for its pursuit is unending and ungraspable, detached from the human lives that produce and supposedly benefit from it. The botching of Hyppolite's operation, which requires his leg to be amputated and replaced with a wooden one, emblematises Flaubert's contempt for this doctrine of progress, which idealises the improvement of humanity in the abstract while resulting in the most freakish damage to actual human beings, since it is a doctrine with no living purpose, which treats human life as a mere means to an end.

Rodolphe and Emma's romantic dialogue, as they stand apart from the crowd while watching from a distance, offers an ironic counterpoint to this abstract doctrine of progress as

[27] Stephen Heath, *Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 56.
[28] Ibid., 241 (emphasis in original). "He had recently read an article praising a new method of curing club foot, and, as he was a devotee of progress, he entertained the patriotic idea that Yonville, so as to *put itself on a par*, should have strephopodic operations." (165)

the collective goal of the nation ("'notre belle patrie'"[29]): ironic, in that, while it imagines itself to oppose such homogeneity and abstraction, it ultimately becomes its complement. If the agricultural fair offers an idealised vision of the unity and utility of all in pursuit of the collective good of progress, romantic love appears to offer an escape from this homogeneity in recognising the uniqueness of the individual. In his speech to Emma, Rodolphe evokes this ideal of romantic love as the unity of two unique souls in their mutual recognition: "Vous sentez le besoin, de faire à cette personne la confidence de votre vie, de lui donner tout, de lui sacrifier tout! On ne s'explique pas, on se devine. On s'est entrevu dans ses rêves."[30] While Lieuvain speaks to the crowd of the "intelligence" of those "populations agricoles" who contribute "au bien de chacun, à l'amélioration commune et au soutien des États," by carrying out "la pratique des devoirs," Rodolphe complains ardently to Emma that this call to responsibility is a societal convention which must be refused, and that the true "devoir" is "non pas d'accepter toutes les conventions de la société, avec les ignominies qu'elle nous impose" (210-11).[31] He tells Emma that there are two moralities: one, "la petite, la convenue, celle des hommes," a variable and conventional morality which "ce rassemblement d'imbéciles que vous voyez" abides by. Then there is the other, the true morality, "l'éternelle," which is "tout autour et au-dessus, comme le paysage qui nous environne et le ciel bleu qui nous éclaire": this moral law of beauty and truth is obeyed by those who abandon the petty societal demand for progress and responsibility, and abandon themselves to "les passions," which are the "source" of all that is meaningful on earth.[32]

[29] Ibid., 209. "'. . . our lovely homeland'" (135).
[30] Ibid., 210. "'You feel the need to confide your life to this person, to give them all, sacrifice all! No need to explain, you divine each other's meaning. You glimpse one another in dreams.'" (136)
[31] "' . . . not accept every convention of society, along with the infamies it forces upon us.'" (137)
[32] Ibid., 211. "'The petty, the expedient, the morality that belongs to man . . . workaday, like that gathering of imbeciles that you see there. But the other, the eternal one, lies all around and overhead, like the landscape that surrounds us and the open sky that gives us light'" (137).

Where Lieuvain's speech offers an impersonal collective myth of infinite progress, Rodolphe seduces Emma by appealing to the opposing myth of the utter singularity of the individual, recognisable only by their true beloved, that twin soul who finds their soulmate and draws them out of the homogenous mass. This counterpoint reaches its dramatic crescendo during the announcement of prizes to those good men and women who have done their part for the cultivation of the land through their labors; at this same moment, Rodolphe presses his advances towards Emma, declaring himself to her explicitly. The two speeches are placed alongside each other in the text, distinguished only by punctuation:

> "Ensemble de bonnes cultures!" cria le président.
> — Tantôt, par exemple, quand je suis venu chez vous… [*This is Rodolphe addressing Emma*]
> "À M. Bizet, de Quincampoix."
> — Savais-je que je vous accompagnerais?
> "Soixante et dix francs!"
> — Cent fois même j'ai voulu partir, et je vous ai suivie, je suis resté.
> "Fumiers."
> — Comme je resterais ce soir, demain, les autres jours, toute ma vie!
> "À M. Caron, d'Argueil, une médaille d'or!"[33]

If the prizes provide an abstract, universally exchangeable measure of the value of a person, of their contribution to that ultimate collective value called progress, Rodolphe's romantic words instead solicit Emma to respond to an appeal to her singularity, her unique destiny as one who is truly seen, not for her quantifiable contribution to an abstract universal, but for her qualitative, singular essence: he solicits her to see herself as an ideal, atemporal image of a person, "saved" from the homogenous degradation of natural life. The irony Flaubert introduces with this counterpoint is thus not merely that Rodolphe's romantic words

[33] Ibid., 215.
"'For good general husbandry!' cried the President.
'Just now, for example, when I came to your house…'
'To Monsieur Bizet, of Quincampoix.'
'Did I know that I would be accompanying you?'
'Seventy francs!'
'A hundred times, even, I desired to leave, and I followed you, I stayed.'
'Manures.'
'As I shall stay tonight, tomorrow, every day, all my life!'
'To Monsieur Caron, of Argueil, a gold medal!'" (141)

are no less hackneyed and rehearsed than the speeches of the government officials; it is that the ideal of personal recognition that he solicits Emma to feel does not escape the impersonality of the prizegiving. What matters is not simply that Rodolphe is insincere in his declarations of devotion to Emma, but that the very ideal of love as the achievement of a perfect recognition of the singularity of each individual reverts perversely into indifference and anonymity, for Rodolphe's words of love are words that could be said by anyone, to anyone. In his appeal to the uniqueness of his and Emma's bond, Rodolphe appeals to something just as abstract and impersonal as the collective ideal of cultural progress: in order to address Emma as a pure singularity, incomparable with anyone, Rodolphe has to deny her any particular content, any particular features as a living individual, and speaks only in abstract banalities.

The fantasy that Emma takes on in accepting Rodolphe's seduction is the fantasy of herself as a singular being so fully recognised by the other, so fully at home in herself, that she has no particular content at all as a living person. This is a fantasy of identity as an ideal image: the fantasy that who one is could be recognised once and for all by one's ideal other, that I could be taken out of the temporal and fragile social condition of life by an intuition of my pure, unadulterated selfness. The problem is that in order to attain such perfect uniqueness, I would have to lose all particular content: in assenting to the fantasy of her irreducible, inexpressible, non-exchangeable uniqueness, Emma foregoes anything that could make her recognisable *as Emma*, as this particular person with these particular qualities. This is so because to name a particular quality of someone is to make this quality communicable through the general medium of language, and to thereby interrupt that purported non-exchangeable uniqueness. The only way to be utterly, irreducibly singular is to be nothing, and no one, at all: in this, the ideal experience of selfhood promised to Emma by Rodolphe's

words of love is the perverse mirror image of that impersonality and exchangeability fêted by the speeches at the Comices.

Flaubert thus brings us to a darkly comic appreciation of something intrinsically failed, and false, about the conception of personhood as an ideal image of one's singular uniqueness, confirmed by the full recognition of the ideal other. Emma will be disappointed in her affair with Rodolphe, needing perpetual guarantees of his devotion, in letters and small acts of love: for since she, and their love, have to exist temporally, she cannot reside in the state of salvation in which the full and pure recognition of her uniqueness would be secured forever. None of these guarantees of love is ever enough, since they are temporary acts which have to be performed in order to be at all, a performance which leaves open the perpetual possibility that they may be enacted under false pretences, since one can always perform an act of love without "meaning" it.[34]

The fantasy of salvation through love is the fantasy of a recognition so pure that it would relate to no particular, finite quality of myself that could ever be compared or confused with someone else, or ever be under threat of loss or decay. Yet it is only in existing for someone else through the particular qualities I take on for them that they can recognise me, only by losing my imagined perfect singularity by letting the other know me on their own terms that I can be perceived by them at all. The only recognition possible is one which in its very event betrays this ideal recognition of my ineffable singularity. In longing to escape the quantifying logic of the Comices – one which would reduce her to a number, to an amount of time served and labour done for the cause of progress – Emma instead assents to an ideal of

[34] The section on love in the chapter on "Les relations concrètes avec autrui" in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (477-484) provides a memorable elaboration of this problem.

recognition wherein every particular quality, everything that could ever make her recognisably herself, evaporates. Between pure quantity and pure quality, Emma herself vanishes.

The ironic perspective attained by the Comices Agricoles scene, then, does more than solicit a reader's detached contemplation of Flaubert's artistry at the expense of his characters. The scene presents the antinomies of identity as alternately pure object or pure subject, pure means or pure end, body or soul; its irony functions not simply by soliciting a detached contemplation of the falseness of this world and the people in it, but by allowing us to observe the antinomic structure at play, and to grasp the life-denying attitude they share as a bad model of personhood. This juxtaposition provokes the question: How might these antinomies of identity, as material *or* spiritual, for others *or* for oneself – in Sartrean terms, in-itself *or* for-itself – be overcome, in the way we live, in the way we *practice* identity?[35] If Flaubert may not be explicitly concerned with these ethical questions, the very logic of his irony in this juxtaposition of the antinomies of identity opens up the question of going beyond them.

6. Blindness, Insight, and the Practice of Identity

Madame Bovary reveals the tragedy of a way of living which flees life's openness and uncertainty in search of salvation through a fixed and ideal identity, a status guaranteed externally, by one's possessions and one's image. That Emma is undone by the accumulation of debt on the purchase of clothes and furniture speaks to a conflict of modernity that she is

[35] The notion of "practical identity," which I draw on here, has been developed by Christine Korsgaard, in *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and by Martin Hägglund, in *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Pantheon, 2019).

unable to work through in her own life: money makes things available in an unprecedented way to whoever can pay for them, regardless of title or conferred status, and in so doing, it appears to offer the promise of a new identity to those who access it; yet insofar as any such identity and status are only guaranteed externally through money and the things one buys with it, they are both perpetually unstable and perpetually unsatisfying, and their inherent tenuousness and separation from anything integral to the individual becomes unavoidably apparent as the money runs out and the debt piles up.

Emma appears to surrender to this recognition when, at the point at which her debts to the cunning M. Lheureux have finally come back to haunt her, she throws her remaining five francs to a blind beggar: "C'était toute sa fortune. Il lui semblait beau de la jeter ainsi."[36] There is some relief and some pleasure in detachment, in accepting and affirming that one is done for, that all one's possessions may be taken away. Emma's *beau geste* of relinquishing the last coin to her name shows her recognition of the instability of identity, the threat under which every version of oneself is placed, as soon as it enters into communication with the world. The image of "Madame Bovary" is tied to the clothes and trinkets, purchased on loan from M. Lheureux, with which she adorns herself, such that the loss of her possessions seems inseparable from the loss of herself, a selfhood which was always tied to a title given by someone else. Since every possession is under permanent threat, the only insight belongs to the one who accepts their own worthlessness, who gives themselves up and revels in this self-abandonment. Yet this abandonment of self is not held up as exemplary by Flaubert, for Emma's gesture is itself ironised: she gives her last *sou* away because she finds the gesture beautiful, seeing herself as an image, aspiring to the performance of a dramatic heroine from

[36] *Madame Bovary*, 374. "It was her entire fortune. It seemed to her glorious to cast it away thus." (286)

a novel or an opera.[37] The abandonment of self is itself a cliché of character, since there is always someone there to experience themselves performing this self-abandonment.

The blind man returns, as all readers of *Madame Bovary* recall, at the moment of Emma's death, and this reappearance deepens the novel's reflection on identity as that which can neither be escaped nor achieved once and for all. As her final death rattle approaches, she hears a voice from the street, reprising a song whose opening lines were heard earlier in the novel:

> *Souvent la chaleur d'un beau jour*
> *Fait rêver fillette à l'amour.*
>
> *Pour amasser diligemment*
> *Les épis que la faux moissonne,*
> *Ma Nanette va s'inclinant*
> *Vers le sillon qui nous les donne.*[38]

Emma cries out in recognition of this voice, with her last word: "L'aveugle!", and begins to laugh "d'un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré," picturing the blind man's "hideuse" face before her "comme un épouvantement,"[39] before the last lines of his song are sung, and she dies:

> *Il souffla bien fort ce jour-là,*
> *Et le jupon court s'envola!*[40]

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[37] Murray Sachs is thus mistaken, on my reading, in suggesting that Emma "throw[s] the beggar her last coin in a desperate attempt to pretend that her financial problem isn't real" (Sachs, "The Role of the Blind Beggar in *Madame Bovary*," *Symposium*, vol. 22, No. 1, Spring 1968, 72-80: 77-78). Sachs's interpretation in particular ignores the significance of Emma's finding it beautiful to throw the coin away: the gesture expresses a self-consciousness about her situation rather than a desperate avoidance of it.

[38] "*A fair day's heat does often move*
The thoughts of some young lass to love.

So to gather with all care
The ears of corn where sweeps the blade
My Nanette shall be bending o'er
The furrowed earth wherein they're made." (311)

[39] ". . . a dreadful laugh, frantic, despairing, thinking she could see the wretch's hideous face . . . like some appalling terror." (311)

[40] *Madame Bovary*, 400-01.
"It blew so hard that very day

Commentators have noted the importance of the blind man, with one observing that he is "linked by a grotesque affinity with Emma herself."[41] In the gleeful hideousness of his song and dance, it has been suggested that he acts as the "conscience" of Yonville, excluded from the community and acting as a reminder, through his grotesqueness and his revelry in flaunting social mores, of that community's inauthenticity, its false airs of propriety and decency, just as Emma's final exclusion at the point of death places her at odds with a community that lives "sans conscience."[42] He has similarly been understood as a character who "stands quite simply for reality," representing "the abrupt displacement of an illusion by the grim, ugly truth," a truth which can only be recognised at the price of a removal from the social world and ultimately from life.[43] The blind man is indeed the perfect emblem of the irreconcilable opposition, within the world of the novel, between the stupidity and falsity of those who live as socially recognised individuals, bearing a certain identity which will always reveal itself to be clichéd, mediocre, and deluded, and the exclusion from the social world, and from any socially bestowed and recognised identity, of anyone capable of insight into this community and how it functions.

On first hearing it, Emma is struck by the blind man's voice, which "avait quelque chose de lointain," sounding like "l'indistincte lamentation d'une vague détresse."[44] Distance, vagueness, indistinction: non-identity, in the dual sense of a lack of social recognition and a lack of internal coherence and fixity as a discrete entity, is the condition of insight. If Paul de

And the petticoat did fly away!" (311)

[41] Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 265.

[42] Mary Dugan, "L'aveugle et la conscience dans *Madame Bovary*," *Chimères: A Journal of French and Italian Literature*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5-14: 12.

[43] Sachs, 76.

[44] *Madame Bovary*, 340. "[I]t had something faraway about it"; ". . . like the indistinct lamentation of a dim distress." (255)

Man wrote of the proximity of blindness and insight, Flaubert here offers a parable of the insight of blindness: it is he who cannot see anything in particular, he who is not solicited by the other's gaze and by the temptations of possession, who can see the whole for what it is. Non-involvement, non-identity, and incapacity are both what enable insight and what prevent it from having any worldly effect, tying it to the indistinctness of death and darkness (at her death Emma pictures the blind man's face amidst "les ténèbres éternelles").[45] In the moment of giving her last coin away to the blind man, Emma identifies herself with him – with his lack of identity – as the condition of gaining the ability to see the world of desiring, involved, blind individuals for what it is, unburdened by the blinding effects of such living involvement.

The blind man's song, meanwhile, with its agricultural imagery of the *fillette* collecting grain, recalls the novel's ultimate scene of social stupidity, the Comices Agricoles. To this is added the bawdiness of the final lines, as the girl's petticoat is blown away by the wind. We may again observe here a stark opposition between alternatives, neither of which offers any hope of self-determination: on the one hand, the social role of a peasant (like those celebrated at the Comices Agricoles, and from whom Emma, as a farmer's daughter, is eager to distance herself), which offers nothing but the meaningless drudgery of the ever-repeating life-cycle (evoked by the symmetry of life and death in the girl's act of stooping towards the earth, just as Emma is moving towards death, even while it is this earth, in the agriculturally worked-over form of the *sillon* or furrow, that "nous donne" nourishment and new life); on the other hand, the denuding of her social role through the flying away of her undergarment, and her exposure, her reduction to a naked body, whose indiscriminate availability to the wind, to the song's narrator and to its listener evokes the "prostitution" with which Emma has

[45] Ibid., 401. ". . . the eternal gloom" (311).

feared being associated.[46] The insight of Emma's final moment, her final word – "L'aveugle!" – is the insight that her affairs could not bring deliverance from the disappointment and mediocrity of a social role, be it that of a farmer's daughter or a country doctor's wife, as it only opened her to the indignity of the status of a 'loose woman,' disrespected even (or most of all) by her lovers. More widely, it is an insight into the condition of a woman within this social world, whose every claim to a status or recognition is at permanent risk of being blown away with the lifting of her skirt, with her exposure to a sexual commerce that renders her one more available body.[47]

But Emma's knowledge, at the moment of her death, of her non-status as a "fallen woman" further opens towards an insight into the insufficiency, instability, and excess of every status, of every identity. In a world of commerce, every claim to an identity can be whisked away with the loss of one's money, one's clothes, one's adornments; and the performance of oneself that we observe in Homais' self-importance or Rodolphe's hackneyed gallantry are but efforts to sink one's being into a character or an identity that turns into self-parody. The *fillette* whose petticoat blows away in the wind is a figure not only for Emma, but for every subject, whose identity is at threat of dissolution with the loss of those fragile, temporal adornments that constitute it.

7. Conclusion: Reflexivity and Responsibility

If Rancière rightly locates identity and disidentification as the central question at stake in *Madame Bovary*, and if Culler rightly highlights the destabilising effect that Flaubert's

[46] "Elle partit donc vers la Huchette, sans s'apercevoir qu'elle courait s'offrir à ce qui l'avait tantôt si fort exaspérée, ni se douter le moins du monde de cette prostitution" (382/294).
[47] Some of these themes are raised in relation to the blind man's song in Michael Riffaterre, "Flaubert's Presuppositions," *Diacritics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1981), 2-11.

construction of a fictional world has on his readers, I argue that their insights nonetheless describe only one moment in a dialectical process: there is no disidentification or demoralisation pure and simple, for both are comprehensible only as the experience *of someone*, who, in the very having of this experience, is already orienting themselves towards a reidentification and a remoralisation. The novel's characters, none more so than Emma, are haunted by threats to the identities they have tried to cultivate, but the contradiction this expresses does not offer disidentification as an ultimate solution. When Emma recognises at the moment of her death that it is the blind man who truly sees her, by tying her adultery to the *fillette*'s naked availability as sexual property, she recognises that she does not have the identity she would like, or the identity that others—like Rodolphe—flattered her with when they wanted something from her, but that who she is is inseparable from her social existence and her social activity, from how she exists in the eyes of the world. Emma cannot go on living because she knows that she cannot *not* care about who she is, cannot not have a conscious take on her own existence in a social world that constantly undermines every identity she seeks, cannot blind herself to how she exists for others. Whether this ending offers a reaffirmation or a critique of the patriarchal culture that places Emma in this position is open to debate. What it does show, however, is that disidentification or impersonality is not an endpoint or a triumph: one will never fail to exist for others, to take on an identity in the world, and the question *Madame Bovary* leaves its readers with is that of how identity can be lived in light of this knowledge.

Responding to Rimbaud's description of consciousness as a fundamental separation from the world, Merleau-Ponty suggests that, "when we place everything into doubt and suspend all of our beliefs," what we "succeed in catching sight of" as the "ground" of all experience is not a realm of non-being, but rather "the horizon of our particular

engagements" as "the power of something in general that is the phantom of the world."[48] As such, the feeling that "we are not in the world" is, understood in its radical truth, the meta-reflective experience that one cannot *not* be in the world, for every suspension of one's engagements only reveals the horizon of possible engagements, of ways of experiencing and engaging with the world: in reflecting critically upon, and in this sense suspending, my identity, I become aware that the purest form of consciousness is only the horizon of possible identities, the possibility of ways of being. Every disidentification is a meta-reflection upon the necessity of identity for any experience whatsoever, even as identity is perpetually being negotiated and remains open to change and loss.

Maurice Blanchot has identified a striking duality to Flaubert's writing: "How can these two things coincide on the level of literature: the totality of encyclopedic knowledge (that is, maximum substance) and the nothing without which Flaubert suspects there is no literary affirmation?"[49] The scene of the *fiacre* with which this chapter began stands as a figure of this simultaneous totalisation of knowledge and emptying out of meaning that Flaubert's writing often performs: a maximalisation of factual details that are stripped of grounding in what might once have seemed their organic meaning, presenting a sublime quantification of data that appears to drain the dramatic plot of all interest, akin to what Fredric Jameson describes as the "infinite subdivision of the objective contents of narrative" in the penultimate chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, "breaking 'events' into their smallest material components and asking whether, in that form, they still have any interest whatsoever."[50] For Blanchot among other readers, Flaubert's uncovering of "the nothing" beneath all particular

[48] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 430.
[49] Cited in Rajeshwari Vallury, "'Infinitizing' Flaubert: Foucault, Rancière, and the Archaeology of the Aesthetic Sensible in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*," *MLN*, Volume 134, Number 4, September 2019, 726-44: 732.
[50] Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (Verso, 2007), 150.

subjective investments is itself the point, and readers can look to Flaubert's interest in mysticism and an ethics of "impersonality" in support of this.[51] What I have tried to show, however, is that the revelation of "the nothing" that a modernist literature such as Flaubert's makes possible, by abstracting the reader from an absorption in the depicted world of lived meanings, is ultimately the revelation that there is no *fixed* way of being invested in the world, no fixed way of looking, no fixed identity, *together with* the recognition that one cannot *not* be invested in the world *as something*, cannot *not* take on an identity *as someone*. The revelation of "the nothing" is the revelation of that "horizon of our particular engagements" Merleau-Ponty writes of, the revelation that all I am is the engagements I take on, the *something* that I sustain in recognition of the nothing, as the indeterminacy of every particular organisation of the world, which is the condition of possibility for every something. As such, modernist experiments in meta-reflexivity, which have much of their origin in *Madame Bovary*, can be understood not simply in terms of a disidentification that would satisfy itself with ironic detachment from the world of meanings and engagements, but rather as a call to responsibility, the responsibility of recognising that one's way of living is not externally or atemporally guaranteed, but depends on the living commitment one brings to it, even in the knowledge that it may fail, that it may one day become unsatisfying or unliveable.

Flaubert provides no positive model of personhood, because what literature enables is not the recording of exemplary lives, but the making available of life to the reflection of those who live, in a way that is unavailable to a fictional character. As Erich Auerbach writes,

> Flaubert does nothing but make the material that [Emma] offers, in its full subjectivity, ready for language. If Emma were able to do this herself, then she would no longer be what she is, she would have shed and thereby saved herself. As it is, however, she does not merely see, but is herself seen as the one who sees and is thereby judged – simply in the articulated naming of her subjective existence

[51] Rajeshwari Vallury's essay, ""Infinitizing" Flaubert," engages with these questions, drawing particularly on the readings of Flaubert by Foucault, Rancière, and Victor Brombert.

passing beyond its own limits.[52]

The character becomes knowable, not as a failure judged in comparison with a model of success, but as a response to the world which reveals its limitations once it is seen and heard, once its enclosure upon itself is broken by a reader's attention. The reader's privilege is not that of occupying a different world than that of the character, but is simply that of being able to read what the character can only live, and to relate to this life with the intimate distance of seeing it take place before their own eyes, in the words of a book. Not being bound within the pages of a book does not free us from the failings and the disappointments that beset fictional characters, but it does allow us the opportunity to learn from those failings. Literature allows us to know ourselves as "characters," and to thereby establish a certain intimate distance towards our character, knowing that in the moment of catching sight of ourselves as if from the outside, we are still ourselves, in our own body and our own history, such that it is up to us to redetermine who we are by taking up differently what we have been. In seeing character fail, the reader is invited to engage self-consciously with their own life and their own character. This, at least, is the pedagogical mode that modernism makes possible.[53]

Such a pedagogy is importantly different from the one practiced by a more 'identitarian' form of the novel, which teaches empathy for characters as 'real people' in an effort to bind us to the world as a meaningful whole. As Culler emphasizes, it is in violent

[52] Erich Auerbach, "On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday," in Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Margaret Cohen (Norton, 2005), 423-49: 425.

[53] Flaubert of course never conceived of his work as pedagogical, and I am deliberately using this term in a way that goes beyond the definition of it as an explicit, top-down form of instruction. Crucial to my argument is the claim that the act of writing has a meaning which goes beyond the writer's explicit intention. However *anti-social* Flaubert's outward commitments are in the form of irony and detachment he cultivates in his writing, the very *communication* of these meanings to readers interrupts this purely anti-social understanding of them: what Flaubert is *doing* in writing *Madame Bovary* is not reducible to what he is *saying* in accounting for this writing and the meaning it is intended to convey. By presenting the failure of character to cohere itself into a convincing identity, Flaubert's work *teaches* its reader to develop a critical awareness of this failure, and to read and live in light of that critical insight.

reaction against such an ethics and poetics of the novel that Flaubert constructs his fictions, estranging his readers from immersion in the depicted world by teaching them to read this world with attention to the conventionalised codes through which people behave within it. But in considering Flaubert's modernism as pedagogical rather than merely demoralising and disidentifying, I mean to suggest that his practices of estrangement and irony do nonetheless enable a binding of the reader's perspective to the world, but a binding of a more self-conscious, mature kind. What a modernist pedagogy allows for is a meta-reflection upon the indeterminacy and constructedness of every version of the world, every way of seeing, and every determination of oneself, the fullest recognition of which is not detachment and disidentification, but a heightened sense of responsibility for the particular ways we *do* act, perceive, and identify ourselves, since we no longer have the alibi that their truth and legitimacy would be guaranteed by anything, or any identity, beyond the activity through which we sustain them.

Chapter Two

Me To Play: Performance, Identity, and Futurity in Beckett's *Fin de partie* / *Endgame*

> Le visage était pâle et beau, je m'en serais contenté. J'allais lui donner cinquante-cinq ans lorsqu'il ôta son chapeau, le tint un instant à la main, puis le remit sur sa tête. Cela ne ressemblait en rien à ce qu'on appelle un coup de chapeau. Mais je crus bon de m'incliner. Le chapeau était tout à fait extraordinaire, de forme et de couleur. Je n'essaierai pas de le décrire, il ne rentrait dans aucune des catégories qui m'étaient familières.[1]

These are the words of Moran, the narrator of the second half of Samuel Beckett's 1951 novel *Molloy*, describing a chance meeting with a stranger. As Stephen Heath writes, this passage may be taken as a reversal of the famous opening of *Madame Bovary*.[2] Where a mysteriously undefined "*Nous*" or "We," narrating the opening of Flaubert's novel, provides a paragraph-long description of the young Charles Bovary's ornate, "composite" *casquette* sitting awkwardly on the boy's knees on his first day at school, Beckett's narrator, Moran, pronounces his incapacity to describe the hat he encounters here. *Madame Bovary*'s supreme irony is achieved through the unbridgeable gulf it presents between, on the one hand, the stupidity of its social world, the misjudged self-conceptions of its characters and their false, clichéd language, and on the other, the pristine language of the narration, whose precision and detachment act as silent judgements upon the depicted world – the strange, brief appearance of a first-person plural narrator in these opening pages, judging the awkward Charles from this detached and quietly mocking perspective, indicating from the beginning that the novel's narration will work to divest the depicted world of its centredness and self-understanding. In Beckett's novel, however, there is no longer any space 'outside' weakness, incapacity, and stupidity to be occupied; language itself is incapacitated and weak, and no

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982), 200-1. "I was thinking he could not be much over fifty-five when he took off his hat, held it for a moment in his hand, then put it back on his head. No resemblance to what is called raising one's hat. But I thought it advisable to nod. The hat was quite extraordinary, in shape and colour. I shall not attempt to describe it, it was like none I had ever seen." Beckett, *Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (Grove Press, 2006), 140.
[2] Stephen Heath, *Gustave Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (Columbia University Press, 1992), 146.

perspective exists which can judge the stupidity of the depicted world, since such judgement would express and uphold a value opposed to stupidity, a value which cannot honestly be said to be available.

Beckett takes up the Flaubertian recognition of stupidity and incapacity as conditions of human life which the literary gaze reveals as soon as it catches itself in the act of depicting a life which has, in the process of its literary rendering, been estranged from itself; but he takes this recognition to the further step of removing from his work any power which would stand outside such a stupefied condition, since there is no sure footing on which one could stand and claim to occupy such externality.[3] This would seem to make the prospect of literature's capacity to provide any space for reflection upon the condition that it characterises especially dim. Beckett's works have, accordingly, been understood in an overwhelmingly negative light, whether within an absurdist paradigm as expressions of the meaninglessness of human action, within a critical theoretical paradigm as presentations of the decline of reason and the self in late modernity, or within a poststructuralist paradigm as renderings of inexpressibility and failure. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, it is in the refusal of any form of externality, any outside of a world of weakness and incapacity, that Beckett intensifies what in the previous chapter I showed to be an essentially *positive* achievement of Flaubert's art: a critical attention to the self-contradictory failings of models of identity which seek a static groundedness that would save them from the uncertainty of life, and a corresponding opening up of the question of how to live responsibly in a world without the transcendence or stasis of an assured identity. While Flaubert uses the quiet cruelty of a distant, narratorial gaze to provoke a reflection upon what it is to be seen from the outside and divested of one's self-

[3] As Culler argues, Flaubert himself moves towards a kind of embrace of stupidity as a value, in recognition that not even his text itself can claim to be exempt from the condition it diagnoses, particularly in the late works "Un cœur simple" and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Culler, *Flaubert*, 153-185).

conceived meanings and purposes, Beckett plunges his reader and his spectator into a world where not even the shaming gaze of a narrator is there to anchor us. The theatrical stage is central to Beckett's art because it allows for a still greater subtraction of externality than the novel, confronting his audience with an immanent undoing of all forms of transcendence and stasis, by virtue of the most basic of theatrical conditions – the presence on stage of embodied life subject to time. Beckett's work demands a reconception of selfhood in reflection upon these basic conditions.

1. The Betting Odds of Salvation

I argued in the previous chapter that Flaubert's treatment of identity in *Madame Bovary* attends critically to the fantasies of transcendence and stasis that his characters cling to in an effort to ground themselves, leading them to take up self-conceptions that are opposed to life. As is most clearly the case with Emma in her search for a true lover, what is thereby sought is a *salvational* form of identity, with the self-image taken on meant to save the individual from the uncertainty and the temporal, fragile condition of life. As I argued, Flaubert's ironic attention to the failings of such efforts to ground our self-conceptions through salvation, and to the larger social world which leads individuals to conceive of themselves in this way, reveals these salvational self-conceptions to be fundamentally alienating and self-undermining attempts to detach from life, which is the ultimate condition of any self-conception and any activity.

The work of Samuel Beckett is known for its renunciation of the possibility of salvation. In Beckett's most famous work, the play *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir is preoccupied with the crucifixion and the question of whether one of the two thieves who

were hanged alongside Christ was “sauvé… de l’enfer.” If one thief was saved and the other “damné,” this would make “un pourcentage honnête”: a high enough probability to wager on being the lucky one oneself. Yet these odds are diminished fourfold when Vladimir specifies that “des quatre évangélistes un seul présente les faits de cette façon,” while, of the remaining three, two make no mention of the thieves, while the other indicates that both of them “l’ont enguelé.” “Enguelé qui?” asks Estragon.

> Vladimir. – Le Sauveur.
> Estragon. – Pourquoi?
> Vladimir. – Parce qu'il n'a pas voulu les sauver.
> Estragon. – De l'enfer ?
> Vladimir. – Mais non, voyons ! De la mort.[4]

Adding to the confusion of the percentage of likelihood of salvation (“one of the four says that one of the two was saved,” Vladimir specifies in Beckett’s English version, reducing the probability of salvation from 50 to 12.5%) is this further confusion over what salvation would be saving the thief *from*: death of the mortal body, or eternal damnation of the immortal soul.[5] This confusion lingers over the subsequent evocations of salvation that Vladimir and Estragon themselves await at the hands of the absent Godot: “Gogo! C'est Godot! Nous sommes sauvés!”[6] And later, in the final moments of the play, when Estragon asks what will happen if Godot comes tomorrow, Vladimir replies: “Nous serons sauvés.”[7] It is never specified: saved *from* what, saved *for* what? Another question follows: is it death we need saving from, or life?

[4] Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1952), 15. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove Press, 1954), 9.
[5] This reference also appears in *Malone meurt*: “Car à quoi bon se décourager, il y eut un larron de sauvé, ça fait un joli pourcentage” (134). “For why be discouraged, one of the thieves was saved, that is a generous percentage” (*Novels*, 248).
[6] *En attendant Godot*, 104 / *Waiting for Godot*, 47.
[7] Ibid., 133 / 61.

The concept of salvation can incorporate this ambiguity because, ultimately, the idea of salvation as transcendence means salvation *from oneself*: the fantasy of salvation is that of being liberated from responsibility for who one is, and to still be there to experience the world without the finitude of one's living perspective. Salvation demands both that I cease to be and that I experience the cessation of my being. Since being responsible for myself through how I live temporally is what limits my ability to have a disembodied and total experience, absolute life can only be achieved through the cessation of actual life. Yet, in order to be an experience at all, this absolute life must still somehow be *mine*, and this requires bringing back in all the conditions of finite, embodied life that salvation was to save us from. The contradiction is irresolvable, and one way of understanding Beckett's work is as a meditation upon this contradiction. If Beckett challenges us to look grimly in the face the impossibility of any such salvation – "Mais réfléchissez, réfléchissez," cries Hamm narrating his story in *Fin de partie*, "vous êtes sur terre, c'est sans remède!"[8] – nonetheless, according to a widespread reception of his work, he accepts the premise that salvation is what *would* give life meaning were it attainable, and the absence of the one entails the absence of the other. In this chapter, I will argue that Beckett does not only reveal the *impossibility* of salvation, but develops a logic of personhood as intrinsically temporal and finite which works against the idea of the *desirability* of salvation altogether.

Yet, it may be asked, is this idea that salvation stands as the ultimate (unrealisable) value truly a commonplace among readers of Beckett? Scholars in recent decades have made great efforts to distinguish their readings of Beckett's work from the "existentialist" and "absurdist" labels it has historically been associated with, questioning the idea that Beckett

[8] Beckett, *Fin de partie* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957, 73, 91 / *Endgame and Act Without Words I* (Grove Press, 1958), 53, 68.

depicts humanity as tragically bereft of meaning, "a tragic devastation, an absurd abandonment," as Alain Badiou puts it in characterising this traditional reading.[9] Instead, more contemporary readers have made an effort to show that Beckett's works do not express a conventional despair or *angst* in the face of a meaningless world (familiarly explained as the expression of post-war malaise), but rather operate a rigorous critique of the foundations of art as a form of *expression*, and of the very notion of a coherent and expressive self that underpins it. Where the "existential" reading of Beckett left intact the category of the subject as a unity which has a certain experience of the world and gives expression to it through their words or their activity, scholars have since shown Beckett to be engaged in a radical problematisation or deconstruction of this subject itself, such that there is not only an absence of meaning on the side of objective reality, but an absence of self and of coherent unity on the side of the subject of experience.[10]

Beckett's own rare statements on art indicate an engagement with this question of the collapse or failure of the self. In his *Three Dialogues* on painting with Georges Duthuit, from 1949, Beckett opposes to an art of expression the ideal of another, seemingly impossible one, which would operate according to the following terms:

> The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.[11]

Expression thus appears both as inescapable and inherently insufficient, and the art preferred by Beckett is one which will remain ceaselessly vigilant to this tension, rather than falling

[9] Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, 3.
[10] Key works include Thomas Trezise's *Into The Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1990), and Daniel Katz's *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (Northwestern University Press, 1999). A notable earlier reading in this vein is Maurice Blanchot, "Where Now? Who Now?", in S.E. Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism* (Anthem Press, 2012).
[11] Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (John Calder, 1989), 103.

prey to an unreflective acceptance of the transparency of expression. The only possible or tolerable art would then be one which goes on expressing only by undermining the very foundations of expression, thus undermining itself in the very act with which it maintains itself. The proposal that there is "nothing from which to express" may be seen as a declaration of the nullity of the speaking subject, who is revealed to be without substance or reality. On such a reading, the ethic held out by Beckett's art would be one of erasing, as fully as possible, thus this speaking subject, freeing or 'saving' writing from the expressive self, so as to "say 'I' no more."[12]

It is not self-evident, however, that the intrinsically problematic status of the subject or self indicated by Beckett's statement on expression necessarily places its dissolution as the ultimate goal, or as the revelation of a truth more fundamental than an epiphenomenal self. For even as there is "nothing from which to express," this nothing is accompanied, always, by "the obligation to express." While it is tempting to read Beckett's account of this double bind of expression as deflationary and despairing – as if the obligation to express were the problem, and the return to silence and nothingness the solution his art calls for – it is surely more valuable to stay true to the tension of this double bind itself as he states it, and to think through its consequences.[13] What Beckett tells us is that expression is both intrinsically insufficient and intrinsically inescapable. As I will argue, however, this insufficiency is as much a condition of possibility as of impossibility in Beckett's work.

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[12] These words are from *Malone Dies*, and are borrowed for the title of Daniel Katz's *Saying I No More.* For a reading of the dialogues on art which points in this direction, see Trezise, *Into The Breach,* 6-10.

[13] Simon Critchley points to this idea of the double bind as crucial to Beckett's works, writing that "the double bind or negative dialectic within which Beckett's work moves is that between the inability to speak and the inability to be silent." (Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (Routledge, 2004), 180.) Critchley points to an important concern of Beckett's work here, but his language nonetheless tends in the direction of treating this double bind as an imposition we desire to escape, and thus participates in a negative reading which favours one side of the double bind over the other. On my reading, what matters is not that we are unable to speak, but that we are unable to speak *enough*, to speak just the right words and at the right time, because it is intrinsic to any selfhood that there is always more to say and more to do before one will be done being oneself. I engage further with Critchley's reading below.

Describing, in his early essay *Proust*, the "Proustian equation" as "never simple," Beckett writes that "[i]n Proust each spear may be a spear of Telephus," evoking the mythical warrior who was wounded by Achilles' spear and subsequently cured by rust scraped from this same spear: time, on this formula, is both that which wounds and that which cures, such that there can be no final cure, and no final destruction as long as there is a form of life that is subject to time, as any form of life must be.[14] This returns us to Hamm's line, "Mais réfléchissez, réfléchissez, vous êtes sur terre, c'est sans remède!" ("Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!") One way of reading this line is as an expression of the terrible inescapability of expression itself, the harsh recognition that one will never escape the mortal condition of being "sur terre" and still be "one," a subject of experience. Such a reading would then hold out the ultimate desirability of (an impossible) salvation from selfhood. As Stanley Cavell suggests, however, "another reading" of this line "becomes possible" if the actor (in the English version) emphasises the word *cure* rather than the word *that*: "No *cure* for that," writes Cavell, "but perhaps there is something else for it – if we could give up our emphasis upon cure."[15] The following reading of *Fin de partie* seizes upon this thought of Cavell's: a reading of Beckett as an author who does not search for cures, even impossible ones, but who poses the question of how to live, once the notion of a cure for life or a salvation from the (always insufficient) self is abandoned.

Even the most famous examples of Beckett's apparent privileging of nothingness and silence as the ultimate good turn out to be prey to the double bind of expression evoked in the

[14] Beckett, *Proust* (Grove Press, 1994), 1.
[15] Stanley Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107-150: 119.

"Three Dialogues."[16] We can think for example of the ending of the prose work *Mal vu mal dit* (*Ill Seen Ill Said*): "Le temps d'aspirer ce vide. Connaître le bonheur." ("Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.")[17] For Badiou, the rare joy of this moment is tied to its evocation of an escape from "the misfortune of life."[18] But that someone is present to breathe the void means we are no longer dealing with the simplicity of pure nothingness, just as the imperative to know happiness attends to that sentiment and makes it depend upon the self who knows and names it; in Beckett's original French, the pathos of the inseparability of absence and presence, nothingness and the someone who holds it in consciousness and thereby distances it from its presumed purity, is heightened by the reference to *time* as that which is required in order to breathe the nothing, time which articulates the nothing as *for* someone living.

Shane Weller cites this and numerous other instances in Beckett's work that evoke nothingness, suggesting that Beckett exhibits "a double, and indeed antithetical, attitude towards the nothing": on the one hand, the nothing is "that which is devoutly to be wished," while on the other, it is "to be dreaded" due to the anxiety it provokes.[19] But this is an overly simplistic way of grasping the ambivalence exhibited in Beckett's works; the tension is not between two opposed feelings that a subject happens to hold towards nothingness, but is a tension intrinsic to the taking up of any relationship (whether positively or negatively valenced) towards that which nominally exceeds all relationality. In the expression of a desire to have the time to breathe nothingness, we recall the necessity of *something* and *someone* to any experience and any knowledge (whether of happiness or anything else), and the breathing

[16] The most philosophically rich argument in favour of Beckett as a writer who desires the end of words is Gilles Deleuze's essay "L'épuisé" ("The Exhausted"), in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 152-174. On this, see note 51 below.
[17] Beckett, *Mal vu mal dit* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981), 75-6; *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (Grove Press, 1995), 97.
[18] Badiou, *On Beckett*, 36.
[19] Shane Weller, "Gnawing to be Naught: Beckett and Pre-Socratic Nihilism," *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 20, 322.

of nothingness is shown to be not a desire for non-being, a desire to melt into and be one with nothingness, but to find a way of *being* in light of this nothingness that one can never coincide with. In the apparent depths of nihilism, Beckett's work remains held to the question of how to live, a question which only the double bind of self-expression, as both inescapable and intrinsically incomplete, makes possible.

2. In The Hollow: *Fin de partie* and the Performative Self

While more recent Beckett scholarship, particularly that of the deconstructive and anti-subjectivist turn, has focused primarily upon his prose works, importantly counterbalancing the tendency in Beckett's earlier reception to focus overwhelmingly on his plays, this chapter returns to focus on the theatrical works – primarily one of his most famous, *Fin de partie*/*Endgame*. If the prose works, most crucially the three novels *Molloy, Malone meurt*, and *L'innommable*, offer great resources for a reading focused on the problem of consciousness and the 'I', the question of *performance*, necessarily foregrounded by the plays, is an especially fruitful terrain for an exploration of the self-conscious and temporal condition of action that I aim to bring out as a reflection upon the intractability of self-relation.

This thematisation of performance can of course be seen to work in support of an anti-subjective reading, according to which the performativity of the self in Beckett's plays reveals the emptiness of the self, the lack of anything beneath the performance. *Fin de partie* has been read in just this way, most notably by Theodor W. Adorno in an influential essay. For Adorno, *Fin de partie* reveals the pretension of the philosophical ideal of "pure identity" that would unite subject and object, by revealing the true nature of this ideal to be "the

identity of annihilation, identity of subject and object in the state of complete alienation."[20] For Adorno, Beckett reveals the buried secret of the Hegelian and Marxian idea of the unity of subject and object to be a degradation of the human which reduces the individual to an inhuman rationality, rendering character the mere enactment of the "tics" of a damaged and incoherent social life. Where Merleau-Ponty writes of history as the creative dialectic of sense and non-sense, Adorno reads *Fin de partie* as an account of the historic collapse of sense into "senselessness."[21]

Against what he calls the existentialist doctrine of the ineliminability of the self, Adorno instead finds in Beckett's play the lesson that "this self is not a self but rather the aping imitation of something non-existent."[22] Hamm – whose name, Adorno observes, is both a "foreshorten[ing]" of that of the quintessential dramatic hero, Hamlet, and an allusion to "ham acting,"[23] denoting an exaggerated and overserious performance that belies a deeper emptiness – "plays at what he no longer is," and his "mendacity exposes the lie concealed in saying 'I' and thereby exhibiting substantiality, whose opposite is the content disclosed by the I."[24] The very excessive performativity of the self reveals its hollowness. Thus, "[w]hat used to be the truth content of the subject – thinking – is only still preserved in its gestural shell." The play's two central characters – the old master, Hamm, and his servant and surrogate child, Clov – "act as if they were reflecting on something, but without thinking."[25]

[20] Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique*, No. 26 (Spring - Summer, 1982), 119-150: 128.
[21] Ibid., 133.
[22] Ibid., 143.
[23] Adorno, amongst other readers, also notes the link to Noah's cursed son, Ham or Haam (as has since been learnt, this connection was explicit in earlier drafts of the play); while Stanley Cavell also points out that "Hamm" evokes both *homme* and the Hebrew "Ha-am" for "the people," associations which further develop the idea that Hamm stands for a generic humanity without particular or genuinely singular qualities. Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 140.
[24] Adorno, 143.
[25] Ibid., 143.

Adorno's argument that *Fin de partie* shows the reduction of selfhood to performance is tied into a reading of the play as a paradigmatic expression of the dialectic of Enlightenment, revealing that Western modernity's effort to fully rationalise nature leads paradoxically to destruction and the collapse of reason and sense. The hollowing out of the living content of the self into the farce of performance parallels the emptying out of nature of its living essence. Where Marx dreamt of the full achievement of society as "the consummated oneness in substance of man and nature,"[26] Adorno sees the perverse achievement of this oneness in a rationalisation of nature that tears it up by the roots, harnessing it to the "instrumental reason" of modernity as the sheer demand for knowledge and control. "Il n'y a plus de nature," says Clov.[27]

"The lie concealed in saying "I"," for Adorno, is that this "I" is a performance, and is therefore not that authentic and spontaneous self-relation it pretends to be: this is what *Fin de partie*, and especially the character of Hamm – with his ridiculous performance of himself, his meta-theatrical references to "*aparté*[*s*]" (*aside*[*s*]) and "soliloqu[ies]," and his recurrent statement to himself, "à moi de jouer" ("Me to play") – is said to reveal.[28] But while Adorno here problematises the idea of a primary ipseity or selfhood as a pure self prior to its practical enactment, he takes it as given that the critique of such primacy, by revealing its dependence upon performance and theatricality, constitutes a destruction of the category of the self altogether. But, while the performativity of the self *can* lead to the self's degradation and fall into incoherence and insincerity, this performative condition – the fact that an identity has to be enacted in order to be at all – is also intrinsic to what we would recognise to be the more

[26] *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 85.
[27] *Fin de partie*, 25. "There's no more nature." *Endgame*, 11.
[28] Beckett, *Fin de partie* 102; 16; 110 / *Endgame and Act Without Words*, 77-8; 2; 68; 82. The line "Me to play" is used by Hamm three times in the English version, at the beginning of Hamm's three soliloquies; in the French, on the second of these occasions he only says "À moi" (91).

positive traits of selfhood, such as commitment, responsibility, achievement, and integrity. It will be my argument in this chapter that a fuller, less one-sided reading of Beckett's work – most crucially, *Fin de partie* – reveals it to be engaged in this intrinsic and irresolvable tension proper to the performativity of the self, rather than merely offering a requiem for the self as a doomed and false project.

The notion of *hollowness* evoked above as a way of describing a certain degradation of character in modernity offers a useful way in to my alternative reading of *Fin de partie* and of the performative condition of the self in Beckett's work. T.S. Eliot's 1925 poem "The Hollow Men" established the idea of the hollowing out of the modern individual as a theme for literary modernism. Eliot's importance for the early Beckett's literary development has been pointed to by critics, and the shared theme of blindness between Eliot's poem and *Fin de partie* (as well as *En attendant Godot*) provides another suggestive figure of the decline of the philosophical ideal of the subject as an all-seeing and all-knowing actor.[29] In *Fin de partie*, when Hamm has Clov take him "right round the world" (*fais-moi faire le tour du monde*), hugging the walls of the "bare interior" (*intérieur sans meubles*) of the play's setting, he pauses, placing his ear against the wall and then, knocking on it with his knuckle, declares that it is made of "des briques creuses" ("hollow bricks").[30] Readers have observed the meta-theatrical implications of this detail, in appearing to draw attention to the fact that this is not a house or a bunker but a *set*, a façade appearing to be a real living space.[31] Critics have further noted how this detail adds to the association of the space of the play with a human skull:

[29] Giuseppina Restivo, "The Iconic Core of Beckett's *Endgame*: Eliot, Dürer, Duchamp." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 6 (1997), 111-124. Cf the lines from Eliot's poem, "The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here." Beckett parodies the godly triumvirate of omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence in Lucky's speech from *En attendant Godot*, which speaks of God's "divine apathie sa divine athambie sa divine aphasie" (*En attendant Godot*, 59); while both the patriarchal figures of his major plays, Hamm in *Fin de partie* and Pozzo in *Godot*, are blind (Pozzo only in the second act).
[30] *Fin de partie*, 41-2 / *Endgame*, 25-6.
[31] Michael Guest, "Paul Ricoeur and Watching *Endgame*," in Mark Byron, ed., *Samuel Beckett's Endgame* (Brill, 2007), 93.

"bare, grey, the two small windows reminiscent of eye sockets, the walls hollow."[32] Each of these critical insights would seem to confirm the basic analysis found in Adorno's essay: the physical space of dwelling – humanity's construction of its own home in the world – hollowed out and reduced to a façade, with the meta-theatrical gesture highlighting the hollowness of what we take to be our civilisation and our place at the centre of the world (Hamm insists on being *bien au centre* of the room[33]), while the hollow skull reveals an emptiness undercutting the "interior" world of the self.

This is not the only use of the word "hollow" or *creux* in the play, however. Earlier, in the first appearance of Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents who are confined to two neighbouring dustbins at the back of the stage, Nagg asks Nell to scratch his back. She tells him, "Frotte-toi contre le rebord," but he responds, "C'est plus bas. Dans le creux." ("It's lower down. In the hollow.")[34] Adorno cites these lines, seeing them merely as the indication of "the waning of a marriage" as a "situation where one scratches the other," the old people reduced to animality.[35] Just as the replacement of the sawdust which Clov used to put at the bottom of their bins with sand "qu'il va chercher à la plage"[36] alludes to a collapse of the productivity of human interaction with nature, the back-scratching (which does not take place, though Nagg assures Nell that she did it for him "hier"[37]) appears to suggest a decline from human civilisation to a savage nature, the human relationship reduced to dumb animality as a result of human destructiveness. But the recurrence of this word (notably, in both English and French, the same word – "hollow" or "*creux*" – acts as both noun and

[32] Hersh Zeifman, "*Catastrophe* and Dramatic Setting," in Robin J. Davis and Lance St J. Butler, eds., *Make Sense Who May: Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1989), 130. The figure of the skull also evokes *Hamlet* again – the skull of one who used to *perform* but is now reduced to dead matter, the jester Yorick – and the threat of meaninglessness posed by mortality.
[33] *Fin de partie*, 41, 42, 100 / *Endgame*, 25, 26, 76.
[34] Ibid., 34 / 19 ("Rub yourself against the rim").
[35] Adorno, 133.
[36] *Fin de partie*, 32. Adorno makes this point about the sawdust on 142.
[37] *Fin de partie*, 34.

adjective, and is used in the former form by Nagg and the latter by Hamm[38]) suggests that it has more than a purely negative meaning to convey. For what Nagg refers to as the hollow of the back does not evoke mere emptiness or the reduction of flesh to a bare skeleton: a hollow is that which makes space for a form to emerge. In this it is comparable to the fontanelles of the infant brain that Hamm refers to later in the play: connective tissue, suturing together the still separate portions of the skull, which will recede as the brain grows and the skull is fused into one.[39]

It is just this sense of the hollow, as what we might call an enabling negativity, a withdrawal from being that is not set against being but is the space within which it develops and finds expression, that leads Merleau-Ponty to employ this term in *The Visible and the Invisible*. "[A] certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing": it is this negativity that is not nothing which I argue is at play in Beckett's works, in distinction from the pure negativity of unilinear decline and emptying out offered by Adorno's reading.[40] In particular, I aim to show that it is through an investigation of Beckett's metatheatrical staging of the question of performance and the performativity of the self – seized on by Adorno as the ultimate sign that Beckett enacts Adorno's own narrative of modernity as decline and the hollowing-out of the self – that we arrive at this enabling negativity or "negative-in-being," by making the questioning of being itself proper to being, rather than held in opposition to it.[41]

[38] The feminine form of the French adjective being *creuse*, as in Hamm's reference to "*des briques creuses*". "*Tout ça, c'est creux*," he says immediately afterwards.
[39] "Une goutte d'eau dans ma tête, depuis les fontanelles" ("Something dripping in my head, ever since the fontanelles") (70 / 50).
[40] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 151.
[41] David Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), 155-197.

This is precisely what the metatheatrical moment stages: in gesturing towards their own theatricality, towards the performativity intrinsic to their selfhood (as when Hamm pronounces that the set is made of hollow bricks, or in the many metatheatrical jokes in *En attendant Godot* about the uneventfulness of the show being performed), Beckett's characters do not – as the 'postmodern' understanding of self-reflexivity suggests – merely pronounce that all is empty, that they themselves are mere fictions and that the selfhood we think we experience is mere illusion or habit. Rather, their metatheatrical act is a declaration that *this* – the space we share as performers and audience; the world we share, without transcendent, external truth against which to judge ourselves – is all that there is.

3. The Tension of the Social

Merleau-Ponty develops this notion of the "hollow of being" (*creux d'Être*) in critical relation to Sartre, whose *L'être et le néant* is grounded upon a strict opposition between being and non-being, facticity and reflection, being-in-itself and being-for-itself.[42] In one of the "Working Notes" to the unfinished *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes, "nothingness (or rather non being) is hollow and not *hole*," contrasting his conception of the hollow as the "negative-in-being" to Sartre's notion of consciousness or reflection as a hole in being, a pure negativity that introduces lack into an otherwise full, unreflective self-identity of being-in-itself.[43] In his critique of Sartre in *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty deepens this point into an ontological conception of the intrinsic relationality and non-self-identity of being as such, showing that being requires articulation, expression and mutability, such that nothing ever simply *is* in itself without already opening itself to being perceived and

[42] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 227.
[43] Ibid., 196.

challenged, even by itself. "The true solution," Merleau-Ponty continues," is "*Offenheit* of the *Umwelt*" – the openness of the primary world – or what he follows Husserl in calling "*Horizonhaftigkeit*," "horizonality,"[44] designating that for anything to *be* it has to take place against the horizon of a world which goes beyond it and which it is open towards. Nothing can be purely in itself, and no experience can ever be a pure encounter that would obliterate distance and mediation, since this obliteration and this purity would be the dissolution of the relation between the object of experience and the one who has the experience, a "disarticulation."[45]

As Merleau-Ponty suggests in this same Working Note with regard to the problem of *l'oubli*, forgetting is not the result of "a destruction of a psychic *material,*" "but its disarticulation which makes there be no longer a *separation* [*écart*], a *relief*."[46] This separation or *écart* is another form of the negative-in-being, a certain enabling negativity or distance with respect to the experience or the memory that is necessary for it to *be* an experience or a memory at all, such that the memory is lost when the distance I hold towards it is disarticulated and I am unable to place it as an object of *my* experience. By placing the negative within being in this fashion, and by understanding negativity in this sense of distance as that which enables things to be, Merleau-Ponty develops his critique of Sartre's dualism of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, by insisting that nothing can be in itself without also being for itself, and vice versa. By starting from the principle that all being has a minimal form of self-relation, Merleau-Ponty further shows that all being is tied to *others*, since the taking up of a relationship to oneself entails seeing oneself through the eyes of another, as a being in the world. The ultimate insight of this argument is that to be a self-

[44] Ibid., 196.
[45] Ibid., 197.
[46] Ibid., 197.

conscious being is necessarily to be *social*, to exist both for oneself and for others, and to live in and through the tension and the challenge that this social institution of the self gives birth to.

Strikingly, Merleau-Ponty evokes the concept of salvation (*salut*) in one of his most significant accounts of the intrinsic sociality of being."To say 'Hell is other people'," Merleau-Ponty writes in response to the famous line from Sartre's play, *Huis Clos*,

> does not mean 'Heaven is me' [*'Le ciel, c'est moi*']. If other people are the instruments of our torture, it is first and foremost because they are indispensable to our salvation [*notre salut*]. We are so intermingled [*mêlés*] with them that we must make what order we can out of this chaos.[47]

The declaration of Sartre's Garcin – "L'enfer, c'est les autres" – expresses the idea that the most fundamental, unending pain that others inflict upon me comes not through physical torture, but through their witnessing of me, through the fact that they see me exist. Sartre's three characters – Garcin, Inès, and Estelle – know they are in hell because, in being enclosed together for eternity without escape, they are each barred the possibility of escaping his or her history, his or her determinations as an individual who exists for others and not only for themselves. The presence of the other two prevents each of them from experiencing themselves as a pure consciousness free of determinations, and instead imposes on each a responsibility for who they are, for the objectivity that they cannot fail to take on in the eyes of others, and which inevitably limits what in their own eyes they could be. Being dead, they can no longer challenge others' views of them through their living activity, and the experience of hell is the experience of seeing themselves reduced to the way others see them, unable to take refuge in the private idea of their own undetermined freedom beyond their existence for others.

[47] Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 41.

Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the *supplice* [torture] enacted upon me by the existence of others shows that they are also implicated in our *salut* [salvation] does not invert the sense of Sartre's conception of the other, but reveals its underlying and unacknowledged principle: in recognising that other people's gaze upon us makes us suffer, we implicitly recognise that our sense of ourselves is always bound up with others and how they see us. The gaze of others would not hurt us if we did not want them to see us in a different way from the way in which they presently do; if we did not already, from the beginning, articulate the meaning and value of who we are and what we do in relation to how we exist for others and how we hope to affect them. Merleau-Ponty reveals that beneath Sartre's anti-social conception of freedom rests a more fundamental sociality, showing that the most basic form of personhood is tied to others, to an ongoing effort at finding recognition of my being-for-itself (my internal experience of my own freedom) in my being-in-itself (my worldly existence for others).[48] While Merleau-Ponty evokes the concept of salvation here, it is evidently of a secular, fragile, and responsible kind, tying salvation to the social, to others: the only "salvation" on this account is one in which we recognise that living together and risking everything for others and for what our relationships make possible is an unending task.[49]

Just as Merleau-Ponty reveals a desire to *remake* the social to be operative beneath any experience of the social as a torment, my argument in this chapter is that Beckett's works

[48] This conception of recognition does not entail that I simply do whatever pleases others, and it does not place recognition in opposition to integrity. It simply acknowledges that the social world of others is the ultimate measure of value and the ultimate realm in which meanings survive, and calls on me to challenge others to recognise me, taking the risk that I will fail or that I will change and be challenged myself in the process.
[49] Such an implicit reworking of the notion of *le salut*, which in French can mean both religious salvation and a greeting or salutation that is intrinsically social, living, and fragile, can be considered in relation to Derrida's decoupling of these two conceptions of *le salut*, for example in *Rogues* (114), and "Dead Man Running: Salut, Salut," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*, 257-292. As Martin Hägglund observes, in a number of his late works Derrida "employs the resources of the French word *salut* in order to emphasize that the religious notion of salvation is incompatible with the opening to the other." Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 128.

reveal, beneath expressions of conscious life as a curse in need of a cure, a recognition that the challenge of others is both what impedes ideal or absolute selfness and is that which enables genuine self-relation. Rather than offering expressions of a desire for salvation from consciousness and mortal life, Beckett's plays pose in the most intensified manner the intrinsically temporal, social, and subjective nature of all experience, of everything that could ever be conceived as either bad or good: they remind us that even the failure of expression is itself a form of expression, that non-being or apocalypse only *is* insofar as it is an object of thought for a living being. The social, and the possibility of its remaking, persists as long as the critique or refusal of the social persists, since these are themselves social phenomena that betray a desire to re-form it.

4. Being in Place: Identity and Symbolic and Literal Meaning

In one of his letters to Alan Schneider, the director of the first American production of *Endgame*, Beckett writes that a central concern of the play is "the impossibility of catastrophe," "the impossibility logically, eristically, of the "thing" ever coming to an end."[50] In a "bare interior" with two windows upon a desolate exterior, Hamm and Clov wait for the world to end. Yet since there must be a consciousness present to experience this end, it is not something they can experience or know. This tension at the heart of the play recalls the idea of the impossibility of the experience of death, explored by such contemporaries of Beckett's as Bataille and Blanchot.[51] Such an impossibility is often understood as a source of torment: it is because I have to go on being conscious of myself that the stories I tell and the identities

[50] Letter of November 1957, in *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 23.
[51] Bataille, *Le coupable* (Gallimard, 1944); Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982). This problem of the impossibility of death is discussed by Simon Critchley in *Very Little, Almost Nothing*, with regard to Blanchot (77-85), and with regard to Beckett (esp. 197).

I take on are never absolute, and I am tormented by the impossibility of ever finally accomplishing myself, by an awareness that my stories about who I am are only stories, insofar as they have to be told in order to be effective, and are thereby open to interruption and forgetting.[52] The fragmented stories told by the narrators of Beckett's Trilogy, and especially the shift in names and identities of the narrator of *L'innommable* (from Mahood to Worm), testify to the failure of any particular name, and of any particular conception of who one is, to hold. But they do not simply do this: rather, as ever with Beckett, what they show is a double bind, in which the necessity of failure also entails that failure is never complete, and where the impossibility of achieving full and final identity is the condition of possibility of any self-relation, any living identity, whatsoever. This is the double bind pointed to in the "Three Dialogues," where the necessary failure of expression is inseparable from the expressivity of this failure itself.

[52] Otherwise put, the consequence of this insufficiency of every story and every account of oneself is not that stories must or should be overcome by silence, but rather that, in Simon Critchley's words, "stories are ineliminable for Beckett" (Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing*, 261 n. 44). On my reading, this is so because selfhood *is* the temporal practice of holding oneself together such that one is always implicitly putting this version of the self in question. Such a self-questioning is only possible from the point of view of a living self who experiences their own intrinsic lack of finality, rather than from the impossible point of view of an idealised silence. Critchley's argument here is made in criticism of Martha Nussbaum's reading of Beckett's works as expressing a desire for ultimate silence, in "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love" (Cf Critchley, 178); and also in critical response to Gilles Deleuze's claim that Beckett's ultimate lesson is to reveal "the inferiority of words" (cited in Critchley, 180). While I am in agreement with Critchley's defence of "the fateful necessity of language in Beckett," where I disagree somewhat with Critchley is with regard to his suggestion that "Beckett's protagonists desire to be done with words, to be finally silent," but that "such silence is impossible, unattainable" (180). While a desire for silence is a recurrent expression of Beckett's characters, this desire itself has to be understood as self-undermining and revelatory of an alternative logic of the continuation of a never fully accomplished, imperfect, ceaselessly vocal life, since this desire is always equally the desire to be present to contemplate the silence (e.g., "Le temps d'aspirer ce vide"). Beckett's works therefore cannot simply be understood to express a desire for a "transcendence" of language that is "always denied," as Critchley suggests, but reveal this desire to be underwritten by a desire for survival, for the redetermination of living language in light of its intrinsic insufficiency and incompletion. While critical of Deleuze for allegedly forgetting "the fateful necessity of language in Beckett," in arguing that the end or transcendence of language is the desire of Beckett's works, Critchley in fact holds a similar position to Deleuze's – for Deleuze himself is aware that, even in the late works for television his essay focuses on, the escape from words via the image is "not easy," and the "hole" that it "bor[es]" in language is transient, prone to "disappearance" (Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 169-170). On my reading, the point at which to criticise Deleuze's essay is not with regard to the idea that Beckett *does* transcend language (which Deleuze does not claim, arguing instead that the function of the image in the late works is to "bor[e] holes" in the surface of language such that language's insufficiency is seen – without this meaning it is simply overcome), but rather with regard to the idea that the overcoming of words is the ultimate *desire* of Beckett's work. This question of the narrativity of the self will be further explored in the Conclusion to this dissertation.

Whereas Beckett's recurring dramatisation of the impossibility of any final resting place is commonly read in negative terms, this necessary failure to ever simply and definitively *be*, this impossibility of stasis or final catastrophe, is equally what allows anything to happen, what makes it possible to take on an identity, to interact with others, and to be open to the new. It is this double bind of possibility and impossibility that Beckett stages in *Fin de partie*. Both Hamm and Clov express the desire for an ending: the first words spoken in the play, by Clov, are "Fini, c'est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir."[53] Such an ending never comes, most simply because an ending can only be known as an ending if one is there to experience it, thus making it not an ending at all. Ultimately, the desire for an ending expresses a desire for certainty ("J'aime l'ordre. C'est mon rêve," says Clov[54]), and for relief from the responsibility to act and respond to the surrounding world. At the same time, the desire for such certainty is itself a worldly activity of someone who wants to have the experience of this certainty for themselves, and in this regard their proclaimed desire for the cessation of the temporal process that brings in uncertainty undercuts itself, since the true form of this desire is one in which the individual has an active experience of the desired state, which intrinsically renders it uncertain and undoes its atemporal fixity. As I have argued throughout, this same tension is at work in every form of identity, which, in order to *be* an identity, cannot be fixed or assured, since this would close it off from any expression and any relationship to itself; the fullest expression of identity must rather be temporal, open to failure and revision, and involved with others.

[53] *Fin de partie*, 15 / *Endgame*, 1.
[54] Ibid., 78 / 55.

This tension is worked through in *Fin de partie* by the ways in which the characters establish and attach to their distributed roles and the sense of "place" they provide. The roles distributed in the play are, most basically, those of a family: Hamm the father and patriarch, Clov his surrogate son, Nagg and Nell Hamm's aged and now useless parents. Taking on one of these roles gives each of them something to do and a place to be. But since the role is also a symbolic one, with the individual stepping into the place of father or son, master or servant, there is never a total similitude between *this* individual and the role they take on; the role appears absolute and definitive, while the life of the individual has to be lived temporally. The fit is never definitively achieved, but has to be demonstrated or proven through what one does, and these actions open the risk of failure or misrecognition – maybe I will fail to properly be a master, or maybe the other will fail to recognise me as such. Hamm, the declining, blind patriarch, offers a pathetic figure of one who tries to flee this fragility by taking refuge in his role, and yet must make constant demands that his role be recognised by the other.

> HAMM. – Ramène-moi à ma place. (*Clov ramène le fauteuil à sa place, l'arrête.*) C'est là ma place?
> CLOV. – Oui, ta place est là.
> HAMM. – Je suis bien au centre?
> CLOV. – Je vais mesurer.
> HAMM. – A peu près! A peu près!
> CLOV (*déplaçant insensiblement le fauteuil*). – Là.
> HAMM. – Je suis à peu près au centre?
> CLOV. – Il me semble.
> HAMM. – Il te semble! Mets-moi bien au centre!
> CLOV. – Je vais chercher la chaîne.
> HAMM. – A vue de nez! A vue de nez! (*Clov déplace insensiblement le fauteuil*.) Bien au centre!
> CLOV. – Là.
> *Un temps.*
> HAMM. – Je me sens un peu trop sur la gauche. (*Clov déplace insensiblement le fauteuil. Un temps.*) Maintenant je me sens un peu trop sur la droite. (*Même jeu.*) Je me sens un peu trop en avant. (*Même jeu.*) Maintenant je me sens un peu trop en arrière. (*Même jeu.*) Ne reste pas là (*derrière le fauteuil*), tu me fais peur.
> *Clov retourne à sa place à côté du fauteuil.*[55]

[55] Ibid., 42-3. "HAMM. – Back to my place! (*Clov pushes chair back to center.)* Is that my place? / CLOV. – Yes, that's your place. / HAMM. – Am I right in the center? / CLOV: I'll measure it. / HAMM: More or less! More or less! CLOV (*moving chair slightly*): There! / HAMM : I'm more or less in the center? / CLOV: I'd say so. / HAMM: You'd say so! Put me right in the center! / CLOV: I'll go and get the tape. / HAMM : Roughly! Roughly ! (*Clov moves chair slightly.*) Bang in the center! / CLOV: There! (*Pause.*) / HAMM : I feel a little too far to the left . (*Clov moves chair slightly.*) Now I feel a little too far to the right. (*Clov moves chair slightly.*) I

Hamm must have his total authority recognised by being placed "au centre," in his place, but this authority must also be seen to be worn lightly, as if emanating naturally from him. Clov, by taking to the word Hamm's demand to be "bien au centre" and looking for the measuring tape, returns the symbolic power of the patriarch to the literal mechanics of this power's institution: the fact that power has to be expressed, rather than being naturally given, means that it can be broken down to a literal content, and this literal content renders it fragile, since it can always change – if being a little to the left or to the right of the centre brings sovereign power into question, if the symbolic power of the sovereign is revealed to depend on the literal mechanics that put it in place, it falls prey to the risk of dissolution. Again, this risk is intrinsic to every practice of being a person, since I can only be who I am by showing this self to others and opening up the possibility of not being recognised in the way I would prefer. Hamm's desire to both be assured of his absolute dominion and to have this assurance appear natural produces the comic effect of the scene, which highlights that the only voicing of power is a dialogical and temporal one which also puts this power in question.

This breaking down of symbolic meaning into its literal or material substrate is explored by the philosopher of language Stanley Cavell as a central feature of the play. As Cavell notes, the "repartée" between Hamm and Clov, which, as Beckett indicates in the same letter to Schneider, "should be played as *farcical parody of polite drawing-room conversation*,"[56] frequently involves this "literalization" of the clichéd, symbolic meanings

feel a little too far forward. (*Clov moves chair slightly.*) Now I feel a little too far back. (*Clov moves chair slightly.*) Don't stay there (*i.e. behind the chair*), you give me the shivers. (*Clov returns to his place beside the chair.*)" (26-7.)

[56] Ibid., 23 (emphasis in original). As Emilie Morin notes, this is one thing that links *Fin de partie* to Sartre's *Huis Clos*, which also "parodies and subverts the structure and the conventions of the drawing-room play." Morin, "*Endgame* and Shorter Plays: Religious, Political and Other Readings," in Dirk Van Hulle, ed., *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 60-72: 61.

attached to words and phrases used.[57] Here Cavell notes the significance of exchanges such as the following:

> HAMM. – As-tu jamais pensé à une chose?
> CLOV. – Jamais.[58]

We expect Clov to take Hamm's bait and ask *what* one thing Hamm is referring to – instead, Clov takes Hamm's question literally, responding that he has never thought of *one thing*. Clov's response to the literal content of the question deflates its lordly grandiosity, while also perhaps satirising the Cartesian doctrine of "clear and distinct ideas" by suggesting that he never thinks of *one* thing but always *many* things. As Cavell's reading brings out, this literalization which undermines clichéd and conventional meanings does not merely play the negative role of deflating the pretensions of bourgeois conversation (as Adorno reads it[59]), but introduces the positive question of the meaning of the words we use as something that cannot be fixed in advance.

Just as Hamm's need to prove his power and his identity by being reassured that he is in his place undermines the idea of absolute authority and absolute identity by acting out his identity in time and seeking the other's confirmation in order that it be real, language opens up the same problem: when I demand of the other that they recognise my power by affirming it in words, I lose control of these words and open up the risk that they may be used against my demand. "J'emploie les mots que tu m'as appris," says Clov to Hamm.[60] Yet in allowing the ruled to speak his words so that his power can be affirmed, the ruler reveals his dependence upon this recognition, and thus grants the ruled the capacity to refuse, to take up

[57] Cavell, 111.
[58] "HAMM. – Did you ever think of one thing? / CLOV. – Never." *Fin de partie*, 56 / *Endgame*, 39. Cavell, 111.
[59] Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 121, 149.
[60] 62 / 44.

the words he has taught them and turn these words against him. Hamm's misfortune is not that he does not get to have the absolute certainty of the final ending, the apocalypse, or the absolute and unassailable recognition of his authority. Rather, it is that he misrecognises his own desire: the very purported desire for absolute authority is a desire to have this authority be recognised by others, and is thus a desire for a perpetuation of the uncertain existence in which he must continue to prove himself. Intrinsically, it is a desire for continuation into a future that is unpredictable and that may not recognise him as he wishes. This is the only form of power one could ever hold, since an imagined absolute and eternal power, guaranteed by virtue of its unassailability by others, would for this very reason be unrecognised by others, and would therefore be no power at all – such absolute power would be the same as absolute powerlessness.

5. Roles, Habits, New Life

Hamm and Clov's shared fixation on an order they can never finally bring about is expressed in most extreme form by their demand to destroy all new forms of life that threaten to invade their world. As Cavell writes, "Solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence — these are not the givens of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking."[61] In their post-apocalyptic shelter, their greatest fear is the outbreak of new living beings who might permit life on earth to continue. Immediately after Hamm expresses the worry that the two of them might be "en train de… signifier quelque chose" and his fear that "tout cela n'aura peut-être pas été pour rien," Clov discovers that he has "une puce," to which Hamm, "très inquiet," replies, "Mais à partir de là l'humanité pourrait se reconstituer!

[61] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 144.

Attrape-la, pour l'amour du ciel!"[62] After Clov pours insecticide down his trousers, he declares the flea to be dead, before hesitating:

> CLOV. – … A moins qu'elle ne se tienne coïte.
> HAMM. – Coïte! Coite tu veux dire. A moins qu'elle ne se tient coite.
> CLOV. – Ah! On dit coite? On ne dit pas coïte?
> HAMM. – Mais voyons! Si elle se tenait coïte nous serions baisés.
>
> CLOV. – … Unless he's laying doggo.
> HAMM. – Laying! Lying you mean. Unless he's lying doggo.
> CLOV: Ah? One says lying? One doesn't say laying?
> HAMM: Use your head, can't you. If he was laying we'd be bitched.[63]

The wordplay in both French and English works upon and renders uncertain the opposition Hamm is eager to uphold between lifelessness and regeneration: lying and laying, "se tenir coite" (keeping quiet) and "coït" as in sexual coitus.[64] If appearances can be deceiving, if Clov cannot be certain whether the flea is dead or merely lying doggo (the better to start up its itching again when least suspected), what certainty can there ever be that life and regeneration have been snuffed out? Emphasising the dependence of the human upon the animality of sexual reproduction ("coït" being used for sex between non-human animals, while the addition in the English of "lying doggo" and "bitched" furthers this association), this moment could be read in Adornian terms as a deflation of the human pretension to non-animal transcendence, by revealing that the height of human reason culminates in a total destructiveness, reason's achievement being the eradication of natural life itself. Yet the comedy of the scene works by undermining the achievement of this destruction and of this fixity of meaning, as Hamm endavours to rescue the language of death from its inadvertent association with the language of life. Of course, he can only do so by communicating with Clov, opening up the path to new life in the form of the communication of a thought – the

[62] 50. "beginning to… to… mean something"; "perhaps it won't all have been for nothing"; "But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!" (33)
[63] *Fin de partie*, 50-1; *Endgame*, 33-4.
[64] On Beckett's process of translating this passage, see Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller, eds., *The Making of Samuel Beckett's* Fin de Partie/Endgame (Bloomsbury, 2018), 309-312.

thought which specifies the correct usage of this expression – in the very act of affirming the end of all life. While Cavell is right to point to the end of all meaning and the end of all life as the characters' explicit goal, if we take intention in a more capacious sense to include everything one *does* in apparent pursuit of a stated intention, this goal is revealed to be undermined by the very carrying out of an activity purportedly meant to bring it about, thus provoking the possibility that their life-activity is aiming at something else which they misrecognise.

A related moment occurs near the end of the play, when Clov spies a small boy ("un môme") through the window.[65] Following a dialogue in which Clov tells Hamm of the boy's appearance (eliminated by Beckett from the English version), Clov begins to set out, with Hamm's gaff, to kill the boy.

> HAMM. – Pas la peine.
> *Clov s'arrête*.
> CLOV. – Pas la peine? Un procréateur en puissance?
> HAMM. – S'il existe il viendra ici ou il mourra là. Et s'il n'existe pas ce n'est pas la peine.
> *Un temps*.
> CLOV. – Tu ne me crois pas? Tu crois que j'invente?
> *Un temps*.
> HAMM. – C'est fini, Clov. Clov, nous avons fini. Je n'ai plus besoin de toi.[66]

This response obviously parodies what may be thought of as the conventional response to a post-apocalyptic world, where signs of new life are greeted with jubilation and care. Hamm and Clov express the refusal of what Lee Edelman has called "reproductive futurism," which places the future hope of the human community in the child as both product and potential reproducer of successful heterosexual coupling.[67] Ultimately, even the elimination of all such "potential procreators" now appears superfluous to Hamm, if the environment is so desolate

[65] 104 / 78.
[66] "HAMM. – No! / *Clov halts.* / CLOV: No? A potential procreator? / HAMM: If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't… / *Pause.* / CLOV. – You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing? / *Pause. /* HAMM. – It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more." 105 / 78-9.
[67] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

that no one has the chance of surviving outside this house they are sheltering in. As a result, the contract between him and Clov appears to hold no further purpose. Did they only stay together to ensure that no new life would spring up? Again, the perverse combination of rationalism and destructiveness in their behaviour lends itself to a reading along Adorno's lines, where the ultimate expression of human reason would be the elimination of a life that it does not hold under its thumb. But the dialogue problematises this anti-reproductivism, already by mere virtue of the fact that the two characters continue to communicate in words and across time. That Clov may be "inventing" the boy, just as the flea may not be a flea (it might instead be "un morpion" – "a crablouse") and may not be dead but merely lying doggo, demonstrates that there can be no end to a controlling rationality's effort at absolute mastery.

Earlier on, Hamm draws an explicit link between the uncontrollability of words and that of children: "Puis parler, vite, des mots, comme l'enfant solitaire qui se met en plusieurs, deux, trois, pour être ensemble, et parler ensemble, dans la nuit."[68] The regeneration of life through children threatens Hamm like the regeneration of meaning through language, threatening him because it does not allow for an ending of which one could be certain. Words cannot be controlled, as we saw above: even Clov, who knows only the words Hamm has taught him, can turn them against him and interrupt his certainty and his authority. Yet without these words with which he names himself and seeks recognition from others, Hamm would have nothing and be no one. The father can only be a father through recognition from the son, and this recognition is intrinsically the bearing of a relationship to the father that makes his status uncertain and questionable. Similarly, Hamm and Clov's attempts to snuff out children as bearers of new life belies an investment in a future, a future in which they

[68] ("Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark.") *Fin de partie*, 92 / *Endgame*, 70.

would be present to contemplate the end of all life. The most destructive desire, *Fin de partie* teaches us, is nonetheless the desire for a future life and the perpetuation of a world in which one's investments are recognised.

This tension between the ideal fixity of roles and the temporal process and fragility of life is exemplified by the family dynamic of the play; such a tension may indeed be thought of as the essential pathos of the family. It is the dependence of each for their sense of self on their role in the collective that prevents them from leaving; as time has its effects, the roles deteriorate, as with Nagg and Nell's inability to kiss or touch, Clov's stoop that makes it hard for him to carry out his work of servitude, and Hamm's blindness which threatens his power as the head of the family. And yet, because of this, they cling to their roles all the more, as we have seen with Hamm's need to have his authority endlessly reaffirmed. Clov meanwhile recognises that his ultimate power is the power to leave, to abandon his role and to rid Hamm of any confirmation of his own. Yet Clov does not leave, but continues to wait for an ending he knows will not come:

> CLOV. – … Je me dis – quelquefois, Clov, il faut que tu sois là mieux que ça, si tu veux qu'on te laisse partir – un jour. Mais je me sens trop vieux, et trop loin, pour pouvoir former de nouvelles habitudes. Bon, ça ne finira donc jamais, je ne partirai donc jamais.[69]

The problem of habit as what Vladimir in *Godot* calls "la grande sourdine" ("a great deadener"), anticipated in the *Proust* study, recurs here.[70] Like Vladimir and Estragon's inability to leave their waiting place, Hamm and Clov remain tied to the habits and roles they have formed together, however much Clov suffers from his role and Hamm suffers from the uncertainty of ever truly occupying his own. Even words appear reducible to habit, the "mots

[69] *Fin de partie*, 108 / *Endgame*, 81.
[70] ("Habit is a great deadener.") *En attendant Godot*, 128 / *Waiting for Godot*, 59.

qui restent – sommeil, réveil, soir, matin," which "ne savent rien dire."[71] Clov's movements around the space appear mechanical, forgetful of living context, his lucidity deadened by repetition – as when, at the opening of the play, he first opens the left window, then goes over and opens the right window, then goes back to look out of the left window (and laughs), then goes and looks out of the right window (and laughs), instead of opening each curtain and looking out the window in a single action. Each time he limps from one side of the room to the other, he also forgets the ladder and has to go back for it (though remembering more quickly each time). Where an immersion in the lifeworld might permit the unity of these activities (moving the ladder to the window, climbing up it, opening the curtain, looking out the window), for Clov they are prised apart, as if nothing but mechanism connected them. What Clov lacks is not so much the capacity to learn "de nouvelles habitudes," but the capacity to cohere his habitual actions into meanings.

Habit thus invites a reading along the lines of Adorno's essay discussed above, insofar as it appears to enact the decay and destruction of the individual personality. Yet, insofar as they have to be repeated in time in order to function, habits are never purely automatic or immune to interference or change – as witnessed by Clov remembering slightly quicker each time that he has forgotten and will need the ladder. The familial dynamic of the play points to the reduction of individuals to symbolic, external, and clichéd roles, yet just as with the assertion of power through language, this reduction can itself only be accomplished in being repeated, and each repetition brings with it the possibility of the role's breakdown or change. This is not because of some indefatigable essence of the human spirit which resists automatisation, but is intrinsic to the temporal structure of habit itself. Just as Hamm's authority isn't limited by not being powerful enough but by the fact that power *as such* has to

[71] *Fin de partie*, 108-9 / *Endgame*, 81.

be expressed in specific instances towards others in order to be at all, thus making itself fragile and open to resistance or degradation, the automatisation or mechanisation of habit is not limited by a resistance external to it, but by the fact that to be a habit at all it has to be taken up *by* someone through their temporal, living activity, who thus bears a temporal relationship to it that is susceptible to damage or change. Even as the only change that can be imagined is an essentially negative one of the breakdown of the current symbolic structure through death or decline – "Quand je tomberai je pleurerai de bonheur,"[72] says Clov at the end of his soliloquy – or the ever-deferred decision to leave, these nonetheless are not *endings* but future-oriented *projects* of the living individual: there is an 'I' who will cry for joy upon falling down and abandoning his function as a servant, an 'I' who will leave wearing his costume of departure ("*Panama, veston de tweed, imperméable sur le bras, parapluie, valise*").[73] Beneath and beyond the ideal of ending, of absolute order or absolute death, is a project of living on in time *as oneself*, with all the fragility, possibility, and risk that this brings.

Just as the literalisation of clichéd or conventionalised language serves to collapse familiarised meanings into a materiality they depend upon, the anxiety around reproduction is an anxiety around the collapse of the meanings we give to life into the purposeless circularity of life, death, and regeneration: Pozzo's famous line in *En attendant Godot*, "Elles accouchent à cheval sur une tombe," is paradigmatic of this.[74] The collapse of the expressions "lying doggo" and "se tenir coite" into the sexual and animalistic content of "laying" and "coïte" provokes a fear of the uncontrollability of this reproduction without purpose, like the words that communicate and reproduce without leading back to a primary, fixed meaning.

[72] 109. "When I fall I'll weep for happiness" (81).
[73] 110. "*Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag*" (82).
[74] *En attendant Godot*, 126. "They give birth astride of a grave," *Waiting for Godot*, (58).

The boy Clov sees (or claims to see) through the window is looking at or near his navel: the material link to the mother and to the biological process of birth again evokes reproduction as a cycle of purposeless continuity, and it is this that Hamm and Clov are in horror of in their effort to snuff out new life.[75] In their seemingly timeless fixity, roles appear to offer protection from recognising this direction of meaning towards meaninglessness, life towards death and towards the endless regeneration of that which will die.

Yet as we have seen, even the most ideal occupation of a role is one that is lived temporally and with others, such that the fullest expression of a role entails an openness to its alteration and its loss. Every role, every identity, depends upon a materiality of life that it takes up and bears towards ends that are not pre-assigned; even as the materiality of life provokes horror at the impossibility of anything to last or be certain, its lack of an assigned purpose is what allows us to take up a relationship to it and thus to never simply be subject to it. The boy himself is not merely a figure of the material process of birth and death; he is

[75] The importance of this theme of anguish before the renewal of life finds further resonance in the Biblical allusion to Noah's son, Ham, drawn out by Cavell. Cavell notes the importance of this name's proximity to that of the son who is cursed (through his own son, Canaan) for seeing his father, Noah, naked, an incident suggestive of a breakdown in patriarchal authority which has to be violently reasserted. Cavell suggests that the play's central theme of the refusal of meaning be understood in terms of a refusal of the covenant between man and God entered into by Noah, who is tasked with repopulating the Earth with a new humanity that will remember its debt to God. After the flood, life will be lived in the hope of salvation from God, in the hope that one will be shown to have lived righteously; for this reason, everything is meaningful in the sense that everything one does has the potential to play a role in one's salvation or damnation. The curse that Hamm wishes to overcome, according to Cavell, is the curse of not being able not to hope: "mere men will go on hoping, go on waiting for redemption, for justification, for meaning. And these claims ineluctably retain God in creation — to his, and to our, damnation. And yet, where there is life there is hope. That is Hamm's dilemma" (Cavell, 130). While there is a danger in asserting that this allegory offers *the* correct way of reading the play, what I take to be important is that the Biblical allegory itself plays on the tension between the temporal relentlessness of biological reproduction and the ideal fixity of a paternal order, the latter of which is undermined by Ham seeing Noah naked, as nothing more than a man. Cavell's suggestion that, for (Beckett's) Hamm, the world must become "*un-created*" (130), must cease to be the creation *of* someone (of God), is highly evocative; but what needs to be added is that this desire for un-creation is itself the expression of a hope. Following the arguments made in this dissertation, the hope that is ineradicable as long as there is life is by no means reducible to a hope for salvation, since it is salvation that would spell the end of all hope, by virtue of being the end of all self-relation on the part of the one who hopes, the end of all ability to hold that which one hopes for. In hoping for something more (or less) than what one currently has, one is not hoping for guarantees of what one is from one's creator, but for a survival in which the question of who one is can continue to be posed, since it has no answer outside the time in which it is lived.

observing his own biological materiality, bearing a living, reflective relationship to it, and not simply coinciding with it. Roles and habits try to take up this uncontainable novelty of life into the fixity of an assigned identity, which appears to offer comfort in staving off the recognition of uncertainty and of death. But this fixity is never what we truly aim at, since it is always a living relationship to the world through our identity that we envision, and that remains at stake and constitutively incomplete even in the fullest enactment of this identity. Ultimately, as the play shows, the answer to the stultifying roles and habits into which Beckett's characters fall is not an abandonment of roles, habits, identities, or of life, but their redetermination. One is never finished with roles, since one always has a name and exists for others; but equally, because roles and habits only function in being enacted by one who bears a living relationship to them, they are never finally accomplished, but function only as the activity of a self-relating individual who implicitly poses the question of their redetermination in their very enactment.

6. The Little Heap: Time and Life

Throughout *Fin de partie*, it is the temporal condition of life that provokes the characters' anxieties, even as time is entailed in all of their hopes, including the hope for a cessation of time. Time is both the condition of possibility for anything to be, and the condition of impossibility for anything to ever be purely in itself.[76] Thus Hamm can only hold sovereign power in his dominion by having it confirmed by one passing act after another, and this

[76] Although this chapter has been critical of a certain 'deconstructive' reading of Beckett, it will be apparent that the approach taken here owes much to a logic of the inseparability of possibility and impossibility articulated by Derrida throughout his work. The reading I have criticised is one which sees the lesson of deconstruction to be the simple fictionality of identities and representational meanings, against which would be placed a pure absence of meaning or lack at the origin of all things, thus positioning *impossibility* as prior to and transcendent of *possibility*, instead of seeing the two as mutually constitutive. Such a reading likewise interprets Beckett's statement regarding the simultaneous impossibility of expression and the "obligation to express" as the mourning of this obligation and the desire for total silence or absence that is looked towards in death, rather than as a constitutive tension where possibility and impossibility each imply the other.

temporal condition of his sovereignty means it is never fixed or assured. The play's central figure of time as that which renders all identities and all possession problematic is that of the "tas" or "heap" of grains, which turns into a heap of temporal units, evoked first by Clov in the play's opening words:

> Fini, c'est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir. (*Un temps.*) Les grains s'ajoutent aux grains, un à un, et un jour, soudain, c'est un tas, un petit tas, l'impossible tas.[77]

Hamm later reprises this figure during his penultimate monologue:

> Instants sur instants, plouff, plouff, comme les grains de mil de... (*il cherche*) ... ce vieux Grec, et toute la vie on attend que ça vous fasse une vie.[78]

One of Beckett's most revealing comments in his letters to Schneider comes in response to Schneider asking him for the identity of this "vieux Grec." This response, which was partially cited above, reveals what Beckett considers the great importance of this image of the heap for the play as a whole:

> Old Greek: I can't find my notes on the pre-Socratics. The arguments of the Heap and the Bald Head (which hair falling produces baldness) were used by all the Sophists and I think have been variously attributed to one or the other. They disprove the reality of mass in the same way and by means of the same fallacy as the arguments of the Arrow and Achilles and the Tortoise, invented a century earlier by Zeno the Eleatic, disprove the reality of movement. The leading Sophist, against whom Plato wrote his Dialogue, was Protagoras and he is probably the "old Greek" whose name Hamm can't remember. One purpose of the image throughout the play is to suggest the impossibility logically, i.e. eristically, of the "thing" ever coming to an end. [*Quoting Hamm*:] "The end is in the beginning and yet we go on." In other words the impossibility of catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end. Don't mention any of this to your actors![79]

The most common attribution of the paradoxes of the heap and the bald head (often referred to under the general name of the sorites paradox, referring to the Greek word for "heap") is in fact to Eubulides of Miletus, who is indeed believed to have lived in the century after Zeno.[80]

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[77] *Fin de partie*, 15-6 / *Endgame*, 1.
[78] 93. "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (70).
[79] Beckett and Schneider, *No Actor Better Served*, 23.
[80] The "notes on the pre-Socratics" mentioned in this letter apparently refer to what have become known as Beckett's "Philosophy Notes," believed to have been written between 1932-34. In the passages cited by Peter

Both paradoxes problematise the attribution of definite states: in the first case, it is put that, if one grain of millet does not constitute a heap, and if the addition of another grain still does not constitute a heap, there can be no definite point at which we have a heap rather than a certain quantity of individual grains, and thus the mass we perceive – a heap of millet – falls aground upon logical analysis. The second paradox poses the same problem in reverse: a man with a full head of hair is not bald; removing one hair or two hairs does not make him bald; at what point, then, can we say that he is bald? Neither of the seemingly opposed states – baldness and non-baldness, heapness and non-heapness – is logically distinguishable from the other. Every heap is an "impossible heap," as there is no logical point at which it attained the status of heapness, no point at which one could say without question: "That is a heap."[81]

It is with the same sense of dispossession that Hamm names the impossibility of a quantity of "instants" ever adding up to a life. Since all that I lay claim to as my own and as constitutive of myself is localisable to certain moments that are now gone, there is no sure way of calling them mine, and no definitive way of holding them together as "my life," no way to assuredly prevent their dissolution into a sheer quantity of instants without form. Beckett's characters are recurrently uncertain over their relationships, their past, what they are doing and why, and at the heart of this radical uncertainty is an anxiety about time as the dissolution of all possession.[82] Even the most intimate of experiences threatens to defy the

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Fifield of these notes, Beckett does acknowledge Eubulides as the recognised originator of the heap and bald head paradoxes, while linking these back to Zeno as their predecessor (Fifield, ""Of being – or remaining: Beckett and Early Greek Philosophy," Vol. V, no. 1, 2011, 67-88: 81-2).

[81] Cf *Molloy*: "I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all, it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every five minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself." (*Novels*, 30.)

[82] Cf "The Calmative": "Yesterday indeed is recent, but not enough. For what I tell this evening is passing this evening, at this passing hour. I'm no longer with these assassins, in this bed of terror, but in my distant refuge, my hands twined together, my head bowed, weak, breathless, calm, free, and older than I'll have ever been, if my calculations are correct." S.E. Gontarski, ed., *The Complete Short Prose of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1989* (Grove Press, 1997), 61-77.

names and the certainty we give to them, since these experiences occur in time and do not constitute who we are in a definitive way, but are kept alive only by a memory that can change their meaning or falter altogether. "On m'a dit," says Clov in his final monologue, "Mais c'est ça, l'amour, mais si, mais si, crois-moi."[83] Since love has to be experienced at a certain time and place in order to be at all, and is only nameable as love in being held at a distance, one can always wonder if what one has known is really love.[84] Such is Molloy's worry in recalling his only sexual relationship, with a woman whose name he believes was Edith, or possibly Ruth. Reflecting further on this experience, Molloy begins to doubt whether the intercourse they had was indeed vaginal, as he had believed, or anal; and, given the latter possibility, he begins to doubt his certainty as to her sex. "Mais est-ce le vrai amour, dans le rectum? Voilà ce qui me chiffonne. N'aurais-je jamais connu l'amour, après tout?"[85]

The moments pile up without ever becoming a unity, without ever reaching such fullness that one can say, *that's my life.* But, as Hamm's line indicates, the very experience of lacking what could definitively be called "a life" is only possible *for* the subject of a life: "*toute la vie* on attend que ça vous fasse une vie" (my emphasis). The distinction between "la vie" and "une vie" (in the English version, between "life" and "a life") shows that life as an ongoing process of arrival and disappearance overruns any desired fixity to "a life," such that "la vie" makes every individual life problematic, threatened by dissolution, and intrinsically incomplete. But, equally, it is because "la vie" does not have a definite direction and a fixed logic that "une vie" emerges: *a* life, *my* life, *is* this relationship I take up to the uncertainty, openness, and unpossessibility of life as such. Life never "mount[s] up to a life" (as Beckett's

[83] *Fin de partie*, 107 / *Endgame*, 80.
[84] This question is explored in Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," *Ethics* 98, January 1988, 225-254.
[85] *Molloy*, 77 / 52. ("But is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes. Have I ever known true love, after all?")

English version of this line reads) as a finished quantity (this is what is "impossible" about the heap), and waiting for it to do so will surely provoke despair. But it is the indeterminacy and evanescence of life as such that allows there to be *a* life as that which one *lives*, for if a life were an assured unity rather than a multiplicity of moments without a given wholeness, one would bear no negative, questioning relationship to it, and one would be entirely unable to unite it as a life by living it.

Thus life as such is nameable only from the perspective of one who lives *a* life, a life that is always in question and is never enough, since if it were a full and finished unity one would hold no living relationship to it. Life's indeterminate openness is something I am never adequate to, and habit will always "deaden" my sense of vitality in some fashion; but it is also only through the articulation of life via habits and norms that life is experienced at all. "La vie," or life as such, only *is* for one who is already living a life, who poses the question of how they are living up to what life could be. There is no pure life, only a relationship to life of one who is living a life and who feels the fragility with which this life is tied together. Life can neither fail to be articulated as 'a life,' nor achieve this articulation so fully that 'a life' would ever measure up to itself as the realisation of life as such and be finally fixed and determinate.[86] The heap is impossible, and yet there it is.[87] There can be no disarticulation of

[86] Cavell is another reader who tends to emphasise only the negative pole of this double bind, writing for example of Clov's reference to Hamm's "story you've been telling yourself all your days" that "the biggest fiction is that one's days form a story, that you can capture them by telling them" (Cavell, 140). Again, on my account, Beckett shows both that any such narrative of the self is insufficient, performative, and open to degradation, and equally that such narratives are *always* operative even at the point at which one announces their breakdown: there is always an 'I' who is the subject of this breakdown of my life story. This then leaves open the prospect of renewing one's life in light of this knowledge of the insufficiency of every account of oneself. Again, this question of the narrativity of the self will be returned to in the conclusion.

[87] Readers have often cited the influence of Greek atomism upon Beckett – explicitly pointed to in early works such as *Murphy* and indicated by some of Beckett's rare statements on his work – for its deflation of "the possibility of ultimate totalization and identity," bringing every presumed order down into the "chaos" of the atomic swerve (Sylvie Debevec Henning, "The Guffaw of the Abderite: Murphy and the Democritean Universe," *Journal of Beckett Studies* No. 10 (1985), 5-20: 20; Fifield, ""Of being – or remaining"," 70). The allusions to the sorites paradox in *Fin de partie* invite reading along similar lines; but to simply read this reference as an evocation of the impossibility of any order or structure, the dissolution of all into chaos, is one-

life from a subject of a life. Rather than enacting the replacement of the mythic spontaneous self by a habituation and performance that reduces selfhood to a fiction, *Fin de partie* unrelentingly pursues the inherent tension or double bind of what it is to have a self-relation, what it is to be a person. To have an experience at all, I must be present as the self-consciousness of the having of this experience, without this self-consciousness needing to be explicit or thetic; yet in being so self-conscious, no experience or action can ever amount to the summation or achievement of who I am, the definitive point at which the individual grains of time become a heap, since this heap would have to both be finished and yet still observable by me, as if I were standing outside my life, looking at it from outside time. The double bind of the self is to be both never complete and without an outside, perpetually open to revision and potential loss, even when its fullest expression is achieved. To be someone is to relate to one's selfhood as that which one holds together through how one lives, such that it is never complete and never the object of a definitive and detached contemplation.

7. Futurity and Perceptual Faith

If selfhood has to be lived, held in living self-relation, in order to be at all, this is further because self-relation requires a world that one projects oneself towards. Merleau-Ponty articulates the intrinsic, pre-reflective tie between self and world in terms of what he calls perceptual faith (*la foi perceptive*). Prior to and present in every reflection on the world and on oneself, one expresses faith in the world one perceives, faith that it offers the answers to one's questions, faith in its reality and its inexhaustibility. "Each of our perceptions is an act of faith," Merleau-Ponty writes, since it draws us towards the perceived world, which we do

sided: the heap is logically impossible, yet, as Clov affirms, it *is* a heap, it both takes on that form and dissolves it as soon as we look at it and inquire about its makeup.

not have total knowledge of – every perception "affirms more than we strictly know."[88] Perceptual faith precedes and undercuts every philosophy of reflection, for in order to reflect on and question the world that is given to me, I have to project myself into a continuation of the world in which my questioning will be heard. It is ineradicable, insofar as even when I question the truth of what I perceive, "I only call some such perception into question in the name of a truer one that would correct it."[89] Yet perceptual faith is also "paradoxical," insofar as we are perpetually aware that our perceptions only take place in relation to ourselves as living, embodied beings, and thus that they are not true in some absolute or objective sense.[90] We are thus drawn into an ongoing interrogation of the world and of how we are tied to it, without any philosophy ever loosening that tie: "Philosophy," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself."[91]

In contrast to Sartre's conception of subjectivity as a nothingness which negates but never coexists with the self-sufficient plenitude of being-in-itself, the philosophy of perceptual faith shows subjectivity to be co-constitutive with the living activity of orienting oneself in the world one perceives. Perceptual faith, being faith, is both inexhaustible and never fully justified or guaranteed: "One can say of it, as of every faith, that it is a faith *because* it is the possibility of doubt, and this indefatigable ranging over the things, which is our life, is also a continuous interrogation."[92] Our faith that the world we perceive is real and that it offers more than we immediately access or know is inseparable from a subjectivity which is drawn towards this world, and which never simply or finally finds itself, since faith

[88] Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 179.
[89] *Phenomenology of Perception*, 377.
[90] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 3-49, especially 9, 30.
[91] Ibid., 103.
[92] Ibid., 103.

invites interrogative activity, and since the dissolution of this faith in certainty would be a dissolution of the subject as a living project of finding a way of being in the world.

If selfhood is tied to a perceptual faith in the world one inhabits, Beckett's works may be seen to demonstrate this in the negative, by showing the diminution of perceptual faith to be tied to a diminution of subjective possibilities. Molloy, invalided and confined to his mother's room, becomes uncertain of his memories, of where he has been and what he has done. Vladimir and Estragon, confined to their roadside spot waiting for Godot, question what day it is and the colour of their shoes. Clov, committed to maintaining a lifeless order without possibility or openness, loses any fluid and meaningfully directed sense to his actions, performing them as if mechanically. Their capacity to act stunted, Beckett's characters' faith in the world itself crumbles. But as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, the very questioning of perceptual faith – be it that of the philosopher of reflection, or that of Hamm's madman who, in looking upon "[t]oute cette beauté" of the world, sees "que des cendres" – is at the same time a renewal of it, since it affirms the commitment to a world one sees oneself acting in, however reduced this world is.[93] That every automated routine has to be enacted over time, each time, in order to be at all; that the enslavement to waiting for a transcendent hope which never comes has to be lived out rather than merely suffered – these reductions of the world are also articulations of a world that one projects oneself towards and seeks further answers from.

It is not only that one cannot doubt the world except by revealing the existence of oneself as the doubting consciousness; it is that one can only doubt the world by projecting a world in which one's doubts will be heard, a world in which the perceptible things will offer

[93] *Fin de partie*, 63. "All he had seen was ashes" (44).

greater possibilities than they do now. No declaration of 'no future' is made without projecting a future in which it will be heard; no killing of a child is carried out except for the life of some other child, even if one names that child 'silence'.[94] Beckett's situations reveal what Alain Badiou calls this "increvable désir" of one who goes on in projecting a world one can live in, even when one professes to have given up.[95] Hamm and Clov reveal these commitments implicitly, undercutting their explicit commitment to ending, since what they aim at is an "ending" of "this… thing" and the advent of an ended world that is nonetheless a world they will inhabit temporally, as themselves.

8. Conclusion: Selfhood Without Salvation

As the above discussion of Merleau-Ponty indicates, the living world towards which all our aims are oriented is a world in which my self-conception is recognised socially. Merleau-Ponty's point here is an eminently Hegelian one: the only way for me to *be* what I proclaim and what I project myself towards is to name myself as such, in a way that renders it communicable and open to challenge from others. As Robert Pippin writes in an account of Hegel's theory of self-consciousness as desire,

> It is in the presence of this sort of challenge that the implicit authority and status self-ascribed must be realized or not, will turn out to be in deed an actual such status […] or not. And that realization must involve the possibility of just such a claim to authority by another.[96]

If everything we aim for is comprehensible only in terms of a world that lives on, implicit in this is that the version of myself present in this world is one who is recognised by others,

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[94] Edelman's *No Future* stakes its argument upon the killing of children, through his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (118-154).
[95] Badiou, *Beckett. L'increvable désir*. Published in English as "Tireless Desire," in *On Beckett*, 37-78.
[96] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Theory of Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 74.

since there is no form of selfhood without such recognition, and no expression of desire that does not entail a conception of the self able to live on in the experience of the desired state. The impossibility of "cette… chose" ever ending,[97] and the impossibility of the grains ever mounting up to a life as a finished quantity, are markers of the fact that who one is never amounts to an object to be viewed transparently from an ideal distance, but is a living activity that one holds in relation to others. On the most basic level, this is because a self-relation is also a differentiation from oneself, such that there is no pure residing in oneself of consciousness: in Hegel's words, "consciousness is for itself its concept, and as a result it immediately goes beyond the restriction, and, since this restriction belongs to itself, it goes beyond itself too."[98] The social recognition of who I am is not a partial or limiting one in comparison with a pre-existent self-enclosed identity; selfhood only is in projecting itself outward and facing the challenge of the only ones who can affirm or deny that I am who I seek to be. Such a form of selfhood is *non-salvational*, refusing the idea of a pure self standing above living engagement, and instead renders the shared world the only one in which a self can be named and a life can be lived.

Beckett's world is one where this social ground of all commitments is recognised implicitly in the very desire to cancel out the world, oneself, and others. His works leave open the question of what it would mean for such commitments to be recognised *explicitly*: to recognise, in our fullest expression of ourselves, that our selfhood can be neither completed nor escaped because of its tie to a world involving others, such that every desire and commitment is realisable only in living recognition, and has no reality outside this fragility. Such a recognition can, I think, be drawn from the famous lines of Beckett's *Worstward Ho*:

[97] *Fin de partie*, 64 / *Endgame*, 45.
[98] This cited from Pippin's revised translation in *Hegel's Theory of Self-Consciousness*, 21.

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."[99] That failing is intrinsic to trying does not mean that there is some true world of perfect silence which we seek and which we falsify as soon as we speak of it, as if the "obligation to express" falsified the ideal of non-expression – for if this were the case, it would not be possible to fail better. Failing better has to have something to do with knowing that there can never be absolute success, not because the perfect ideal is a pure negativity, but because what one creates can only be at all in being responded to by subjects capable of recognising it and thereby opening it to revision. Failing better has to involve rendering one's aims explicit as committed to their survival beyond one's own control and beyond the guarantees of salvation, such that one incorporates the consciousness of failure – in this sense of perpetual incompletion and the interpersonal measure of all achievement – into one's activity.[100]

In this, failing better holds an inherent promise of democracy, in the idea that each expression is and knows itself to be tied to its being taken up and challenged by others. It is thus that these words of the outwardly apolitical Beckett have been taken up in a political context, most recently by Cornel West, in a CNN interview about the popular uprising in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. West quotes this "blues line of our Irish brother" as the keyword for responding to the "failed social experiment" of the

[99] Beckett, *Nohow On*, 101.

[100] I take this to be both the most hopeful and the most capacious way of reading Cavell's suggestion at the end of his essay on *Endgame* that Beckett offers the (surprisingly neo-classical) prospect of a theatre without an audience, by extending theatricality to the whole world: "we have not found our way outside, we have merely extended the walls" (Cavell, 145-8). Cavell himself leaves open a more purely deflationary understanding of this idea (implied by the use of "merely" in the passage just cited), which would suggest the inescapability of role-playing and the inaccessibility of a space of extra-theatrical knowledge of the theatre as a nightmare or "damnation" (148). But the idea of a universal theatricality permits of a quite different reading, one in which the realisation that we are performative beings without a pre-performative, fixed nature can be factored into our activity, our future performances. The knowledge of theatre is not extra-theatrical but meta-theatrical, just as Merleau-Ponty shows that the knowledge of life is not intellectually reflective but radically reflective, belonging only to one who is mortally living and for whom knowledge is tied to living activity. On this account, the supposedly 'postmodern' gesture of self-referentiality in works of narrative art is at its essence a gesture of freedom, in that it suggests a reciprocity between life and art which renders everything open to revisability.

United States.[101] Failing better entails the founding of a social order which does not settle for fixed images of equality and achievement – "black faces in high places" – and the narcissistic attachments to an atemporal unity of the image that they promote, but which makes the intrinsically intersubjective, incompletible, fragile and revisable work of social life explicitly recognised within social practices themselves, such that they are perpetually open to revision and contestation.[102]

Conceiving of the survival of our efforts in these terms rather than those of salvation as an idealised and lifeless preservation of the same also allows a recasting of the relationship of the living to that new life represented by the child. Rather than offering the salvational fantasy of a pure preservation of the dead, or appearing as a stain on an impeccable silence, the child encapsulates the double bind of survival and risk intrinsic to sociality: the child can only preserve the life of the older generation in attaining the capacity to recognise that which the old one wishes to pass on, taking up her own relationship to the old and opening it to challenge and revision or rejection. The very recognition of the father's law that is required in order that it be taken in and submitted to by another, and made to live beyond the father's body, also and inseparably opens that law to questioning. For Adorno, Clov's inability to "grasp the reins and abolish [Hamm's] domination," his remaining by Hamm's side up until the curtain even as he says he is leaving, signals a failure of "[t]he Hegelian dialectic of master and slave," such that "[t]he dialectic swings to a standstill."[103] But in refusing the caricature of a dialectical allegory, *Fin de partie* keeps the dialectic alive as what Merleau-Ponty calls "hyperdialectic," a dialectic that would be without end and without a total or simple preservation and surpassing of the past, and which instead participates in a life that is

[101] Cornel West interview on CNN, Friday May 29, 2020. Accessible at https://youtu.be/SwzRfM7fmSk
[102] "Failing better" could also be read alongside what Merleau-Ponty calls the "good error." *The Visible and the Invisible*, 125.
[103] Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 145.

"concrete, partial, encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits."[104] Does Clov stay or go; does the play restart all over again; will anything change except an eventual death? Far from closing out the possibility of the new, *Fin de partie* attunes us to its emergence even despite every effort, like those words which spill out and add to themselves, and which can be turned against and away from their originator. God, the ultimate figure of origin, is a "bastard" ("salaud"), an ill-begotten child who doesn't "yet" exist[105] – only the living can create their own community, and the only God they can give birth to is that fragile collectivity that is its own infinitely revisable self-expression, "encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits."

[104] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 95. A parallel may be suggested between this notion of a dialectic that does not turn itself into a formal system and Beckett's remark, in a rare interview, that he has "not tried to concretise the abstraction" his work performs, in the sense of refusing "to give it yet another formal context." Interviewed by John Gruen, "Samuel Beckett Talks About Beckett," in *Vogue*, vol. 107, no. 2 (February, 1970), 108.
[105] *Fin de partie*, 76 / *Endgame*, 55.

Chapter Three

Giving Oneself: Possession, Sex, and Recognition in Godard's *Vivre sa vie*

> Film's presenting of the world by absenting us from it appears as confirmation of something already true of our stage of existence. Its displacement of the world confirms, even explains, our prior estrangement from it. The "sense of reality" provided on film is the sense of *that* reality, one from which we already sense a distance.
>
> STANLEY CAVELL, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*

> Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is *used* by us.
>
> KARL MARX, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

1. Cinema's Flaubertian Heritage

This study began with Flaubert, who has been received by scholars alternately as a realist and as a precursor of the avant-garde of twentieth-century modernism. Flaubert is a 'realist' in the sense that he renders the most seemingly insignificant and contingent details available to aesthetic experience, and shows how the projects and identities that people take up fail to recognise and respond to this reality, which is deposited by the text in a neutral fashion, deflating the purposive investments that the characters bring to it, all of which are shown to be mired in the blindness of cliché and convention. In this sense, the central concern of Flaubert's 'realism' is to render access to reality problematic – in Culler's words, his art is "*de-realizing* in the sense that it does not show men actively making their destiny but allows that world of action and effective choice to collapse at the reader's touch."[1] In showing the failure of his characters to engage seriously with reality, he presents this reality not as accessible or liveable, but as that stubbornly meaningless backdrop against which all living projects stand out; and while Flaubert makes this clash between the intentions of people and

[1] Culler, *Flaubert*, 10.

the indifference of reality available to his readers, he does not offer any way in which it could be overcome, except through the detached contemplation of literature itself. As Auerbach writes, Flaubert

> merely has a tool, language, that is capable of unmasking stupidity. The language of the writer thus holds the measure of stupidity and thereby also participates in that intelligence that is otherwise unseen. But even this single final instance functions only by unmasking – and gives no hope at all, grants no escape into the freedom of an authentic reality.[2]

Such an "authentic reality," Flaubert's text seems to suggest, cannot be *occupied* by the living, because it has nothing to offer them, but is indifferently, stubbornly itself – like the apricots which Homais is convinced are responsible for Emma's fainting fit, when their presence is in fact entirely contingent to the true cause of her distress, Rodolphe's departure. Flaubert's 'realism' is concerned with rendering reality profoundly alien to every purposive project,[3] and in this sense already participates in the abstraction of works that we more easily recognise as modernist, stripping away every presumed order of representation that would centre human life and the identities through which it is organised.[4]

Cinema is in many ways a Flaubertian medium: it presents, or at least promises to present, a reality whose lack of mediation by human meanings is proven by its essential indifference to those meanings. Where Flaubert established this awareness of visible reality

[2] Auerbach, "On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday," 431.
[3] Roland Barthes' essay, "L'effet de Réel," approaches this topic (with regard to another work of Flaubert's), but in a way that fails to see what Flaubert is doing, and the kind of attention he solicits in his reader: the fact that the 'non-meaning' of objective description ends up becoming a meaning (a signifier of 'the real') is not some illusory sleight of hand with which Flaubert tries to make us think we are encountering reality; this tension between the banal, indifferent nature of an objective reality and the meanings through which people try and fail to understand and cohere it is central to Flaubert's poetics.
[4] Rancière offers an important insight on this question, in a passage cited in Chapter One: "for abstract painting to appear, it is first necessary that the subject matter of painting be considered a matter of indifference. This began with the idea that painting a cook with her kitchen utensils was as noble as painting a general on a battlefield. In literature, it began with the idea that it was not necessary to adopt a particular style to write about nobles, bourgeois, peasants, princes, or valets. The equality of subject matter and the indifference regarding modes of expression is prior to the possibility of abandoning all subject matter for abstraction. The former is the condition of the latter." *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 54.

through the implicit, ironic distance between the flat language of objective description and the grandiosity and pretension of the language used by his characters, cinema establishes it simply by showing human bodies in a world which lends these bodies no special privilege or centrality. Stanley Cavell has pointed to this quality of cinema, writing that films are made up of "*a succession of automatic world projections*"; while James Leo Cahill has written of this capacity as "cinema's Copernican vocation" to "displace" the centrality of human mediations of the immediate visible world. Both Pier Paolo Pasolini and Gilles Deleuze have compared cinematic address to that famously Flaubertian mode of 'free indirect discourse': neither objective nor subjective, the film image hovers at a certain distance from the perspectives of the people who enter it, showing not simply what they see, but showing them *in* the world they are seeing, in a way which cancels out the presumed priority of any particular lived perspective.[5] Cinema's natural or ontological question may be a Flaubertian one: how must questions of narrative and character be reimagined once human life is placed resolutely in a world which offers no guarantees that human beings can understand or make sense of it, a world which grants no special priority to human dramas?

The films of Jean-Luc Godard offer a sustained engagement with this question. One of the difficulties scholars have in characterising Godard's oeuvre is its apparent ambivalence between an anarchic joy in the unmaking and remaking of representational codes and conventions on the one hand, and the dour critique of a society of the spectacle, of the conventionality and cliché prevalent in everyday life, on the other. Both of these modes, however, respond to the same problem – an alternately joyous and despairing one – which is the lack of any definitive guidance from the world as to how one should be or act. The

[5] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Harvard University Press, 1979), 37; 72. Emphasis in original. James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 75-8.

anarchic revelry felt in a film like *A bout de souffle* (1960), as its characters, Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Patricia (Jean Seberg), try on personae in imitation of Hollywood stars, performing so many received gestures in exaggerated and disconnected fashion, eventually pitches into disaffection and demoralisation, as these performances all becomes boring and unconvincing even to the performers themselves, culminating in Michel's abandonment of the gangster plot, declaring "J'en ai marre" and letting the police catch up with and kill him. Such bipolarity is felt at the formal level of the film itself, which throws out cinematic norms of representation with reckless abandon in its infamous use of jump-cuts and narrative digressions, only to find its energies finally spent, brought to an abrupt end with the arbitrary death of its bored protagonist, there being no 'natural' way for a work of such formal and narrative anarchy to resolve itself. The character's thrill in putting on and taking off identities, and the filmmaker's parallel thrill in inventing new ways of filming and editing on the fly, are haunted by the fact that all such modes are provisional and perpetually insufficient responses to a world which neglects to provide any reliable or meaningful image of itself, or any guidance on how to live in it.

This Flaubertian condition of cinema that I am arguing Godard's films respond to comes down to the recognition that the world cannot be an object of art's *possession*. Paradoxically, the very unique *access* to visible reality that defines cinema shows this reality to be irreducible to the purposes that are taken up towards it, by virtue of its stubborn and banal *thereness*. Such thereness is not possessible, because it is not *for* anyone. This unpossessibility is revealed through the temporal form of cinema, which is both the condition of its privileged access to visible reality *and* that which undermines every effort to make of this access a knowledge or possession – for to experience things as temporal is to experience

them as exceeding all particular determinations one gives to them.[6] Godard's films raise questions that draw on a Flaubertian heritage, now reoriented towards the distinct capacities and conditions of cinema: What form of identity is possible for subjects of a world that is inexhaustible by the projects taken up towards it? What narrative form or order is possible for a work of art under conditions in which the world is inexhaustible by, and neglects to deliver itself up to, any such order?

2. The Subject of *Vivre sa vie*

Godard's 1962 film, *Vivre sa vie: Film en douze tableaux*, engages with these questions in the most exacting manner, reflecting at once on the question of its own narrative coherence as a film, and on the question of the coherence of its protagonist's life. From its opening moments, the film presents a complementarity between the problem of its own coherence and unity as an artwork and the problem of the identity of its protagonist, Nana (Anna Karina). The opening credits take place over three shots of Karina's face, alongside a series of repetitions of the film's musical refrain, each repetition separated by a gap of extended silence. She is shot from three angles, first in profile facing left of frame, then facing the camera front-on, then in profile facing right of frame. The subtitle ("Film en douze tableaux") announces the film's fragmentation into a sequence of discontinuous episodes, while these unmoving shots of Karina/Nana both evoke the tableau form of painting and, in their temporal duration – accentuated by the gaps of silence separating each repetition of the musical refrain, and Karina's slight movements – undermine the very association to that

[6] A famous sequence of Godard's *Les carabiniers* allegorises this problem: the young men bring home the 'spoils of war' in the form of an assortment of postcards showing photographs of the world's great sites. Through its interminable length, the sequence stages a confrontation between the stasis of photography and the temporal condition of cinema as that which undermines possession, as these images become boring the longer one looks at them.

form's stillness which they at first suggest. Taking place outside any narrative context, these shots beg the question of whether we are looking at the actress or the character; the directness of the framing of Karina's face, and her direct gaze back at us, suggests the form of an identification photo, as if Karina/Nana is being compelled to offer up her face to the camera's knowing sight, as if it is the camera that will identify her, will grant her identity.

The credits conclude with a citation from Michel de Montaigne that functions as the film's epigraph: "Il faut se prêter aux autres et se donner à soi-même." This citation itself functions at once as a statement of the film's thematic concern for identity and as a reflection on the formal question of the film's own coherence, establishing the intellectual abstraction of the epigraph form as a model of unity, replacing the narrative and stylistic unity of a more conventional film, which *Vivre sa vie* will self-consciously resist. From the beginning, *Vivre sa vie* establishes itself as concerned simultaneously and complementarily with the problem of the identity of the individual subject of experience, and the demands that such problematisation of the self put upon an artwork to establish a new definition of its own coherence.

The citation from Montaigne signals what will become the central narrative development of the film, namely Nana's entry into sex work, and more generally her struggle to define herself in relation to men, their demands of her, and her dependence upon them. Nana's commencement of sex work is directly tied by the film to her radical renunciation of identity. In Tableau #4, we see Nana being interviewed by a male policeman after she has been arrested for stealing; she is filmed front-on, as in the second of the three shots that play under the opening credits, with the camera's eye explicitly aligned with the identifying gaze of police authority, as she addresses the camera and an offscreen voice that comes from

behind it. The man asks her what she is going to do, given that she doesn't have any money to live. "Je…" she hesitates. "Je est une autre." Without further explanation, the next scene shows Nana walking the streets and picking up her first client.

This feminisation of Arthur Rimbaud's famous remark expresses a radical form of disaffection: rather than cling to a self that will be misrecognised or abused by others, Nana, in the face of this police interpellation and in the loss of any social markers of identity (home, husband, position), pronounces an abandonment of herself: since she cannot do anything to resolve her situation, she detaches from any named identity. Sex work is understood to offer a particular response to the problem of Nana's identity and others' desires to possess and define her: if all particular men are disappointing, and if the form of identification and possession they offer her is unsatisfying, then she avoids such possession by offering (a certain use of) herself indifferently to men *in general*, irrespective of their individual distinctions. In being 'possessed' by all, she is truly possessed by none: here again time plays an important role, as the limitation on the amount of time a sex worker spends with a client makes possession explicit as a finite quantity, and thereby undermines the principle of possession as such. It is in taking on the role of the prostitute that the woman refuses the bad identities given to her by society: she will not choose any particular man, nor choose any particular identity for herself through a man, because to accept any identity would be to accept the other's power over her.

Critics and scholars have attended to the fragmentation of narrative and aesthetic form in *Vivre sa vie*. Often this has been seen to entail a breakdown of coherence altogether, as if the film's attention to its own gaps prevents it from being able to *say* anything at all, to convey anything to an audience other than to remind them of this failed coherence itself. As such, Nana's engagement in sex work has been seen to defy meaning or interpretation, or to

suggest a surplus of meanings that are never settled on. Susan Sontag, in an important early essay on the film, writes that

> *Vivre Sa Vie* is certainly not "about" prostitution, any more than *Le Petit Soldat* is "about" the Algerian War. Neither does Godard in *Vivre Sa Vie* give us any explanation, of an ordinary recognizable sort, as to what led the principal character, Nana, ever to become a prostitute. … Godard's interest is in neither the psychology nor the sociology of prostitution.[7]

In this essay, Sontag – in a manner consistent with her polemical essay of the same period, "Against Interpretation" – insists that the film is concerned with "proof" rather than "analysis," with showing rather than explaining; and she understands Nana's entry into sex work in terms of proof, as something that the film simply shows ("the whole point of *Vivre sa vie* is that it does not explain anything"). Meanwhile, Adrian Martin considers the topic of sex work to entail a range of possible meanings that the film suggests but does not genuinely take up. Calling the film "a virtual manifesto of modernist anti-coherence," Martin suggests that "prostitution (as sociological reality and existential metaphor)" is but one subject among many that the film "raises and drops," such that "it is hard to pinpoint what this film is centrally *about*."[8]

But why is sex work – and more largely, the situation of a precarious young woman – the narrative context in which such fragmentation is performed? While these critics are right to indicate that the film is not fundamentally concerned with psychological or sociological *explanation*, it is the situation of sex work – where actions typically associated with intimacy and personal investment are performed with a certain indifference, or for reasons tied to quantity rather than quality – that allows the film to stage this defeat of psychology and explanation; and this situation of sex work is itself a function of and a response to the

[7] Susan Sontag, "Godard's *Vivre sa vie*," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001), 196-208: 199.
[8] Adrian Martin, *Mise-en-scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art* (Palgrave, 2014), 35-6.

precarious status of women, in a context in which a woman's identity is tied to her *possession* by a man or by men. Sontag's declaration that Godard's films are never primarily concerned with being "topical" is important – especially today in response to the received image that exists of Godard as the representative filmmaker of 1960s radicalism – but she overstates the opposition between the "topical" (ie the social and the situational/personal) and the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of the film: it is only *through* its presentation of a particular, socially embedded situation that the film will stage questions that concern art, world, and subjectivity in general. The overarching such question is that of *disidentification*: what does it mean to refuse or fail to take on an identity? What is it that makes such refusal or failure possible, and what does this reveal about sociality and subjectivity as such?

3. Disidentification, Recognition, and the Possession of Woman: Beauvoir, Sartre

The understanding of femininity in terms of a lack of identity, with a woman's identity tied to her possession by a man and the title she receives from him, has a long history, as does the figure of the prostitute as the *other* of these positively identified images of woman (as wife, mother, daughter, etc). Emma Bovary, née Rouault, finds the possessions that adorn and define her to be alternately desirable and alienating: while she seeks out beautiful things with which to dress and surround herself, she also finds herself disturbed by the impersonal character of the possessions through which her life is determined. Arriving at her new home after her wedding, Emma enters the conjugal bedroom and sees on a desk a bridal bouquet: "le bouquet de l'autre," that of Charles' dead first wife, the other Madame Bovary. Emma "songeait à son bouquet de mariage, qui était emballé dans un carton, et se demandait, en rêvant, ce qu'on en ferait, si par hasard elle venait à mourir."[9] The things that give her

[9] Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 66.

definition *as someone* are equally the things that make her replaceable, defined in terms of a social role, one which has been occupied before her and which will continue to define her after her death, as someone whose life was merely the means to the end of fulfilling this assigned role or title. At the end of her life, hearing the words of the blind man's song, Emma is confronted with the definition of who she is in terms of her exposure to men's desire, leaving her with no identity of her own except this bitter recognition.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *Le deuxième sexe*, sees the possession of women as a means through which men have turned away from their own freedom, a freedom that depends upon the renunciation of all possession:

> [M]an attains an authentically moral attitude when he renounces being in order to assume his existence; through this conversion he also renounces all possession, because possession is a way of searching for being; but the conversion by which he attains true wisdom is never finished, it has to be made ceaselessly, it demands constant effort. So much so that, unable to accomplish himself in solitude, man is ceaselessly in jeopardy in his relations with his peers: his life is a difficult enterprise whose success is never assured.[10]

Beauvoir here captures the Hegelian dynamic of recognition, seeing the possibility of social relations that go beyond the "unhappy consciousness" which Sartre, in *L'être et le néant*, believes we are inescapably stuck in.[11] But Beauvoir nonetheless suggests that man's tendency is to renounce the "difficult enterprise" of an authentic life in contact with other free individuals. For Beauvoir, man's primary way of doing this is through the myth, the "embodied dream," of woman.[12] Woman offers a form of "restfulness in restlessness," an

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage, 2011), 163-4.
[11] Beauvoir refers to Hegel's unhappy consciousness shortly before the cited passage, writing that the "foreign freedom" of other consciousnesses both "confirms my freedom" and "enters into conflict with it: this is the tragedy of the unhappy consciousness; each consciousness seeks to posit itself alone as sovereign subject. Each one tries to accomplish itself by reducing the other to slavery." As the subsequent lines cited here indicate, Beauvoir, unlike Sartre in *L'être et le néant*, sees the movement beyond unhappy consciousness towards recognition as possible but perpetually fraught. Sartre explicitly draws on this Hegelian term, writing: "Human reality is… by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state" (*Being and Nothingness*, 140).
[12] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 164.

> opaque plenitude that [man's] consciousness would nevertheless still inhabit. … She is the perfect intermediary between nature that is foreign to man and the peer who is too identical to him. … [B]y a unique privilege she is a consciousness and yet it seems possible to possess her in the flesh. Thanks to her, there is a way to escape the inexorable dialectic of the master and the slave that springs from the reciprocity of freedoms.[13]

Woman offers man a consolation which allows him to step back from the difficulty of freedom as collective life and mutual recognition of our living, mortal nature, where nothing is guaranteed by one's possessions; in defining her as a "docile freedom," a freedom less than his own, man makes woman into a distinct kind of possession, a human possession who 'gives' herself 'freely,' such that in possessing her, man "accomplish[es] himself,"[14] becoming (experiencing himself as) self-sufficient, or self-possessing:

> Appearing as the Other, woman appears at the same time as a plenitude of being through opposition to this existence whose nothingness man experiences in itself; the Other, posited as object in the subject's eyes, is posited as in-itself, thus as being. It is in woman that the lack which the existent carries in his heart is positively incarnated, and it is in striving to find himself through her that he hopes to realize himself.[15]

Woman stands as the instrument through which man seeks to resolve the ontological problem of his constitutive lack, which Beauvoir defines in the Sartrean terms of in-itself and for-itself: man attains fullness, attains his identity *as* man and as the in-itself for-itself he seeks to be, through (possession of) the woman.

Yet insofar as his identity is made possible only by and through that which he is not, and insofar as this identity only operates through avoiding confrontation with a truly free other (another man) capable of recognising him in his freedom as an equal, man does not definitively succeed in burying his restlessness through the possession of woman; he possessess woman in order to make himself whole, in order to possess himself, but such self-possession defines him as *being* rather than as *existence* and freedom, and is thus intrinsically

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 165.
[15] Ibid. Translation modified.

unsatisfying to him. He shies away from confrontation with other free individuals unencumbered by the possessions that give him being, but in his heart he knows that these possessions are hollow, since they lack the freedom to truly recognise his own. Such is the status of woman, who, as a "docile freedom," is defined uneasily as one who is free enough to give herself to a man of her choosing, but not free enough to assert her own freedom as a challenge to his, and thus not free enough to grant him the true recognition he desires.

If the docile freedom of woman has been defined in terms of this freedom to choose one man rather than another – to choose which other will bestow identity upon her, or perhaps simply to choose her captor – then it is just such a docile freedom that the sex worker refuses, or is refused. The association of the figure of the prostitute with the renunciation of identity, which we have seen with Nana above, is strikingly suggested by Sartre in his major early work, "La transcendance de l'ego," where he elaborates on his theory of impersonal consciousness through an example drawn from the psychologist Pierre Janet:

> A young bride was in terror, when her husband left her alone, of sitting at the window and summoning the passers-by like a prostitute. Nothing in her education, in her past, nor in her character could serve as an explanation of such a fear. It seems to us simply that a negligible circumstance (reading, conversation, etc.) had determined in her what one might call "a vertigo of possibility." She found herself monstrously free, and this vertiginous freedom appeared to her *through* [*à l'occasion de*] this gesture she was afraid of making. But this vertigo is comprehensible only if consciousness suddenly appeared to itself as infinitely overflowing in its possibilities the *I* which ordinarily serves as its unity.[16]

Sartre uses this case as an example of his thesis that the "I" or self is not truly aligned with consciousness, but is the *object* of consciousness, an object towards which consciousness projects itself, while this consciousness itself remains radically impersonal: "The ego is not the owner of consciousness; it is the object of consciousness."[17] Here, Sartre's example illustrates the capacity of consciousness, or freedom, to abandon the identity within which it

[16] Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 100. Translation modified.
[17] Ibid., 97.

has tried to contain itself (as this man's wife), for the means through which it has thus far maintained such a unity are habitual, conventional, and utterly impermanent. This example is striking in its parallel to Godard's film: the shift from marriage to sex work (merely fantasised in Sartre's example) constitutes a shift from identity to disidentification. Sex work stands as the figure for 'falling' out of identity (hence Sartre's description of this feeling of freedom as a form of vertigo), just as it is commonly said of sex workers that they 'fall into' prostitution. The woman in Sartre's example realises that *nothing is stopping her* from making this gesture of "summoning" men who walk past her window; the identity she takes on as her husband's wife depends on habits and norms of action that have no real weight to them, belonging only to that secondary formation which is the "I," and as such, these habits and the identity they affirm can be broken in an instant.[18]

Sartre does not elaborate upon the social context that conditions such an experience and such a fantasy, but it is taken for granted that this solicitation of an indifferent plurality of men is the role that a woman without identity, without the protection of a status, will 'fall into'. Underlying such a sedimented idea of sex work as a condition into which unprotected women fall is a culture which determines the worth of a woman through the man or men who possess her: if she is not privately possessed, she will be possessed as a public good. As we have seen, it is such a condition which Emma Bovary is threatened with in the days before her death as she strives to pay off her debts and avoid ruin. Insofar as the threat of being marked as a prostitute, and thus as a publicly possessible good, stands over women as the fate they will fall into if they lose private protection, this expresses the truth of a culture within which women are defined as possessions.[19] As such, and as Beauvoir and others have argued,

[18] Godard's interest in this question is shown already in his 1955 short, *Une femme coquette*.
[19] As Beauvoir writes, "From the economic point of view, [the prostitute's] situation is symmetrical to the married woman's." *The Second Sex*, 613.

sex work is not opposed to the world of marriage, family, and law, but is this world's necessary complement.

The parallels between Sartre's essay and Godard's film are greater still, for Sartre also cites Rimbaud's phrase, "Je est un autre," seeing it as a correct expression of the relationship of fundamental discontinuity between consciousness and self:

> The reflective attitude is correctly expressed in this famous sentence by Rimbaud (in the "Lettre du voyant"): "Je est *un autre.*" The context proves that he simply meant that the spontaneity of consciousness could not emanate from the *I*, the spontaneity *goes toward* the *I*, rejoins the *I*, lets the *I* be glimpsed beneath its limpid density, but is itself given above all as *individuated* and *impersonal* spontaneity.[20]

On this level of pure reflection, Sartre argues, the ego or I "undoubtedly appears, but appears *on the horizon* of a spontaneity."[21] Consciousness is spontaneous and impersonal, while the "I," far from being identical with this spontaneous consciousness, is the object *toward which* thought is oriented: representations, or phenomena, first appear to this spontaneous consciousness, and only secondarily, in articulating its response to these representations, does consciousness nominate itself as a personal "I" who is the subject *of* this experience. The I is *necessary* as an object of consciousness, but is nonetheless fundamentally *fictional* and ceaselessly on the brink of collapse: even as consciousness constantly re-unifies the contents of its experience through the constitution of an "I," each such unity is only the temporary projection of this automatic consciousness, with no agency of its own. The association of sex work and disidentification through these two examples from Janet and Rimbaud, echoing across Sartre's elaboration of his theory of consciousness and Godard's film, demonstrates both the cultural understanding of the sex worker as a figure of disidentification, *and* the

[20] *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 97-8.
[21] Ibid., 97.

philosophical interest of this figure as one which characterises what Sartre considers the disidentifying condition of subjectivity as such.

But if Sartre's account shows disidentification to be a general capacity of subjects, with prostitution as an exemplary figure of this capacity and this threat (implicitly because of the social precarity of a woman's identity and status that it reveals[22]), it is Beauvoir who poses the question of how this relationship, between woman as lacking identity and man as bestowing upon her a derivative identity, is *lived*. The point here is not that Beauvoir provides some empirical content to fill out a pre-existing philosophy, but rather that, in emphasizing the *social* nature of the relations through which subjects take up and renounce identities, in a way that is importantly different from Sartre's account, Beauvoir reveals a temporal and unstable *relation* where Sartre sees only a self-enclosed failure. The difference Beauvoir introduces, as indicated above, concerns the concept of recognition. If man relates to woman as a "docile freedom," then this relation, and the possession that it means to entail, is inherently unstable and uneasy – as unstable and uneasy as the expression, "docile freedom." This is because the relationship thus taken up by man towards woman is uncomfortably poised between two radically opposed forms of relationality: recognition and possession.

This tension is not the result of some contingent interruption of the male fantasy of domination, as though women *just happen* to be freer, stronger, or smarter than men would like; rather, the tension is proper to those fantasies themselves. The man does not simply wish to assert his will over the woman, but rather wants her to assent to him, to choose him (over

[22] The case of the woman on a date given as an example of bad faith in *L'être et le néant* can be understood in similar terms (*Being and Nothingness*, 96-8).

other men) as her possessor: insofar as a woman is a consciousness capable of choosing one man rather than another – something that is inherent to man's desire for her, to the identity and status he desires to gain through her – she is never finally or simply possessible. In showing how woman has been defined as a "docile freedom," whose assent to man's dominance and possession grants him the identity he seeks, Beauvoir reveals a tension inherent to the patriarchal culture that subordinates women: since the one who dominates requires the freedom of the other to choose him in order that he can gain the identity and status he seeks, this other – woman – implicitly bears the freedom to challenge the entire structure of her subordination.

4. Disidentification and Affirmation

Both Sartre and Godard evoke sex work as a figure of disidentification, drawing this connection via their evocations of Rimbaud's "Je est un autre." Godard's film, however, does not treat disidentification as an endpoint, but rather as an occasion for posing the question of what it is to, as the film's title states, *live one's life* with identity under erasure, in question, out of place. Even as Nana sees sex work as a way to renounce the bad identities by which she has been defined – to escape the efforts of men to fix her in place – she is nonetheless *present to* this renunciation, and her affirmation of disidentification through sex work is itself the affirmation of an identity, an identity that she has to sustain and that she may later reject. The subsequent sections of the film show Nana continuing to struggle with the tension between existing for others and her own conscious relationship to her own existence: while sex work offers a radical renunciation of certain socially sanctioned identities or determinations of her as a woman, nonetheless, inasmuch as she is alive, she is alive *to* the existence she has in the world, and has not simply slipped into an absence from herself.

One of the most problematic tendencies in literature on *Vivre sa vie* is that which effectively affirms Nana's death at the end of the film, seeing it as the positive realisation of both her own disidentifying commitment and that of the film itself – as though her death completes an affirmative process of disidentification that the film has embarked upon and treats as a positive achievement. Sontag, for one, draws a direct association between Nana's affirmation of sex work as disidentification and her death, understanding both as instances of the priority of "proof" over "analysis" that for her constitutes Godard's modernism: Sontag writes that in entering sex work, "Nana has become what she is. She has entered the road that leads to her affirmation and to her death. Only as prostitute do we see a Nana who can affirm herself." This is an affirmation of "what she is": as Sontag observes in reference to Nana's conversation with a fellow sex worker in Episode 6, "Being free means being responsible. One is free, and therefore responsible, when one realizes that things are as they are."[23] Sontag thus sees the ultimate realisation of Nana's freedom in her death, for this is the one condition in which she can truly be "what she is."

Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, in their dialogue on *Vivre sa vie*, also read the film's ending as an affirmation of Nana's death, with sex work understood as analogous to or a path towards death. Observing the opposition that is established during the film between the "specialness" Nana desires to be recognised for and the impersonal "goodness" observed in her by her pimp, Raoul, Farocki remarks that Nana is "indifferently murdered, in the most radical denial of her 'specialness'. Raoul drives away, leaving her lifeless body behind. The other pimps do the same. Only the camera remains with Nana, and for two long minutes it

[23] Sontag, "Godard's *Vivre sa vie*," 205.

pays homage to her 'goodness'."[24] As with Sontag, Silverman and Farocki see the affirmation of death to be fundamental to *Vivre sa vie*; they associate both Nana's sex work and her death as instances of the film's overarching theme of "the 'unmaking' of a subject,"[25] identifying Nana's death as the point at which this unmaking is fully achieved, and thus implicitly as a conclusion which both the film and Nana herself ultimately affirm as "good."

One may, however, ask: why would a film called *Vivre sa vie* be oriented around an affirmation of death? Indeed, the film makes clear that, in the moments leading towards her death, Nana does not want to die. Her last words, while trying to escape the gunfight that is breaking out between the rival pimps she is caught between, are "Non, pas moi, non!" If Nana's freedom is tied to affirming her own loss of self and her ultimate death, it seems difficult to square this with her desperate flight from death in her final moments. Silverman and Farocki do offer a response of sorts to this objection: Silverman remarks that Nana's reversion to a certain desire for "specialness" is "Godard's way of suggesting that one does not accede without protest or resistance to the egoic surrender" of disidentification. "We begin to understand," Silverman continues, "why a certain amount of textual violence is necessary to bring about the enactment of that paradigm."[26] In other words, the film does the work of forcing Nana to affirm her true desire for self-abandonment, which she herself glimpses at certain moments, only to subsequently revert to a narrative of self.

But there is an obvious contradiction here that both Sontag and Silverman and Farocki are forced to overlook in order to maintain their readings: if Nana's freedom is in her capacity

[24] Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Speaking About Godard* (NYU Press, 1998), 30. This "two minute" closing image of Nana's body referred to by Farocki is not what we see in any extant version of the film – we see Nana lying dead for just a few seconds. It remains unclear if an alternative cut of the film exists containing this longer closing shot.
[25] Ibid., 28.
[26] Ibid., 25.

for affirmation, then this freedom is not realised, but annihilated, by her death. In the most radical moment of affirmation of "what she is," in her conversation with Yvette in Tableau #6 (highlighted by both Sontag and Silverman and Farocki), Nana declares: "Après tout, les choses sont comme elles sont, rien d'autre. Un visage, c'est un visage. Des assiettes sont des assiettes. Des hommes sont des hommes. Et la vie, c'est la vie." As she herself points out, what matters is not simply that things *are* what they are, but that one is there to recognise and affirm them as such: "Tout est beau. Il n'y a que s'intéresser aux choses et les trouver belles." Nana's death obliterates this capacity to acknowledge and affirm things, which requires that she be distinct from them, rather than the thing she will become as a corpse. The critics discussed above are certainly right that the film marks Nana's death as formally *necessary*, as the only way the film can possibly end; but this is quite different from saying that her death is, or can be, affirmed as an ethical good.

5. The Dialectic of the Special and the Good

It is far more plausible to regard Nana's death as a tragedy – though a tragedy of a particular, modern(ist) kind. Nana's death is formally necessary because of what it allows the film to convey; but this, again, does not constitute an affirmation of (her) death. What makes this tragedy modernist is that the artwork's (and the artist's) own culpability in Nana's death is foregrounded, in a way which makes explicit something that is true of all tragedies, but usually unacknowledged: the tragic hero(ine) only dies because the author decides to kill them. Sontag rightly emphasises that the formal necessity of Nana's death is contrasted to the deliberately weak narrative motivation for it – we are not told anything of why Raoul is selling Nana to another pimp, and the gunfight itself borders on the farcical, with one of the rivals forgetting to load his gun, gesturing almost indifferently to his partner to do the job for

him. For Sontag, this is a mark of Godard's refusal of analysis, reasons, psychology: a refusal which, on her reading, establishes Nana's death as a positive, affirmable achievement of divestment from identity, from self-relation. What I wish to argue, instead, is that this tension between formal necessity and weak narrative motivation serves to highlight the culpability of the artist and his technical means – camera, sound, montage – in her killing, in a way which contradicts any suggestion that Nana herself "affirms" death.

As Silverman and Farocki observe, the film positions Nana between two poles established early on – the "special" and the "good," otherwise understood as the personal and the impersonal. In the film's opening scene following the credits, Nana tells her estranged partner, Paul, that she wants to be recognised as "quelqu'un de spécial." Paul declines to offer her this recognition, remarking instead that he thinks everyone is the same. Nana's desire to be an actress, expressed here and in a subsequent conversation with a photographer, is linked to this desire to be seen as special, and it is in pursuit of this desire that she leaves Paul and their (unseen) child. Even as she is expressing this desire to Paul, Godard's camera shoots Nana from the back – a provocative opening to the film, which shows the power of cinema to arbitrarily grant or revoke specialness, here directly undermining Nana's expressed desire to be seen. Both Silverman and Farocki and Sontag want to assert a sharp break between Nana's self-regarding desire in the film's early scenes and her later affirmation of the destruction of the self, arising at the point of her interpellation by the police and her entry into sex work. Yet, as Silverman and Farocki themselves note, the desire for specialness re-emerges even after this moment: most significantly, at the meeting with Raoul which will end with her agreeing to work for him, she asks if he considers her to belong to "un genre de femmes spéciales." Raoul dismisses this desire as harshly as Paul had dismissed its earlier expression: "Moi, je trouve qu'il y a trois genres de filles," he replies: "celles qui ont une expression,

celles qui ont deux expressions, celles qui ont trois expressions." As Farocki remarks, "This is his way of telling Nana that only superficial distinctions separate one woman who sells her body from another—in other words, that the category of specialness does not obtain within the class of prostitutes" – thus undermining Nana's hope of being recognised as special.[27]

When, earlier in this conversation, Raoul instead affirms the "bonté" or goodness he observes in Nana's gaze, she is bewildered: she does not want to be seen as *good*, a designation she describes as "catholique," tied to virtue, essence, soul, and universality[28]; instead she wants recognition for the specialness and desirability of her outward appearance, her image. Sex work appears to offer her a rite of passage in the discovery of the ultimate insignificance and indifference of these outward qualities, by making her exist in the world as nothing but quantity: a certain number of expressions, a certain amount of money she is worth to Raoul, a certain quantity of time she spends with each client, a certain list of acts she will perform. Nonetheless, it is clear that Nana does not simply abandon herself, her desire, or her pre-existing idea of her own specialness from the moment that she enters sex work – this is made evident already by the fact that she seeks recognition of her specialness even after she has begun this career, from none other than her prospective pimp.

Later scenes further show that, far from instituting a break between specialness and goodness, or selfhood and its abandonment, the film presents Nana's continual oscillation between these poles, up until the end. In Tableau 9, her distinctiveness and her desire are recognised by an unnamed young man, who buys her a pack of cigarettes after hearing her ask for some, while Raoul ignores her, talking to a colleague: this young man, unlike Raoul,

[27] Silverman and Farocki, *Speaking About Godard*, 19.
[28] See the further discussion of the significance of Nana's use of this term below.

appears to see her as special. The young man will become Nana's lover, reappearing in the film's one scene of love and happiness, in Tableau 12, immediately before she is driven to her death by Raoul. The abrupt insertion at this point in the film of this love scene, without a clear narrative lead-up to it, featuring a lover who is never named and who never speaks in his own voice, is a further instance of the film's introduction of narratively arbitrary elements that contribute to the formal necessity of Nana's tragic death: the specialness Nana hopes to retrieve through romantic love is met by its destruction in death, in Raoul's revenge upon her for daring to prioritise herself. As Silverman remarks, in this scene, "Nana seems to be happily in love, which is the condition, par excellence, of 'specialness'," and thus Nana is enacting a "reversion to her earlier obsession."[29]

In their attentive reading of virtually every detail of the film, Silverman and Farocki are compelled to acknowledge the absence of any simple shift from identity to disidentification, specialness to (impersonal) goodness; but they nonetheless want to maintain the idea that the film's true aim, and Nana's true desire, is to establish such a fundamental shift. As such, every time Nana "rever[ts]" to conceiving of herself as special or deserving of some unique recognition, they understand this as a retreat from her true insight, a lapse of her commitment to "egoic surrender,"[30] to the surrender which can ultimately only be achieved through death, since life continues to give her things to care about, and reasons to care about herself. Thus they read all of Nana's expressions of desire for recognition of herself as a unique individual – which persist throughout the film – as regressions from an affirmation of her own annihilation which she attains at other, truer moments. What I wish to do, instead, is to take seriously what the film shows us: not a priority of impersonality over the personal, of

[29] *Speaking About Godard*, 25.
[30] Ibid.

goodness over specialness, of affirmation over desire, but a perpetual, and perpetually unresolved, oscillation between them which refuses to grant priority to either. Once we grasp this, we can better understand the poles of identity and disidentification, specialness and goodness, as opposing terms in a structure that the film is working to define and to diagnose, in pursuit of that which evades simple identification with either side of these dualisms – namely the *life* that is evoked in the film's title.

6. Language and Silence Between Life and Death

The other element through which *Vivre sa vie* presents this tension between the personal and the impersonal, identity and disidentification, is language. Already in the opening conversation with Paul, Nana expresses her frustration with words: finding that the two of them are merely repeating fights and miscommunications they have had countless times before, she declares, "Plus on parle, plus les mots ne veulent rien dire." Throughout this scene, several lines are repeated, enacting this degradation of the meaning of words: when Paul asks, about another man in Nana's life, whether this man has more money than him, she responds: "Qu'est-ce que ça peut te faire?" She then repeats this question three times, each with a different intonation, like an actress rehearsing her lines – first combative, then inquiring, and finally as a lament, as if the meaning and power has gone out of the words and they express only the failure of communication itself. "Je voulais dire cette phrase avec une idée précise," she explains. "Mais je ne savais pas quelle était la meilleure façon d'exprimer cette idée. Ou plutôt je le savais, mais maintenant je ne sais plus." What Nana laments is the uneasy relationship between the social materiality of words – the fact that they have to be spoken in this particular moment, in this particular context, to this particular person, who may or may not understand in the way we wish – and the inner meaning she wants them to

express. Thus she repeats her line, as if trying to capture its true meaning; but in so doing, she turns her words into an exaggerated performance, and turns herself into an actor – something she has already declared to be her desire. Language can never provide the certainty Nana longs for in searching for recognition of her specialness, for whereas specialness is something unanimous that would be permanently present and immediately recognisable, words are temporal, and open to response and revision: as soon as words have been spoken, they are no longer present, but are left to linger in memory.

Nana's dissatisfaction with language is reiterated in the longest dialogue scene of the film, a conversation she has with a philosopher – Brice Parain – whom she meets in a café, in the penultimate tableau (#11). Parain's words to Nana, in response to her sense of frustration at the contradiction between her private experience and the linguistic form with which she tries to communicate it to others, are the closest the film comes to directly responding to the question of how to *vivre sa vie*, how to live one's life. Nana says to Parain, repeating words she has spoken to Paul: "Moi, je trouve que très souvent on devrait se taire, vivre en silence. Plus on parle, plus les mots ne veulent rien dire." Parain responds by insisting, first, that it is impossible to separate thought from the language in which it is expressed, and second, that truth is not separable from error, but must pass through error as part of the process of its articulation. In place of Nana's despairing sense of a conflict between truth and the mediated, temporal form through which it must be expressed, Parain suggests instead (acknowledging explicitly that this thought owes something to the philosophy of Hegel) that truth is established only through mediation, language, and error, through the process of struggling to articulate a meaning and discovering what happens to a thought once it is expressed to others. If Nana feels herself to be possessed by a language that is strange to her as soon as she starts to speak – "Est-ce que [les mots] nous trahissent?", she asks – Parain suggests that life can

only be lived by making what use we can of the limited means at our disposal ("On pense dans la vie, avec les servitudes de la vie, les erreurs de la vie, il faut débrouiller avec ça"), and in this sense repossessing them, recognising that even their strangeness to us is our concern. "Nous les trahissons [i.e., les mots] aussi," he responds to Nana: since words are products of human creation and human history, we are responsible to them as the means we have developed for expressing and communicating, and when we renounce them as insufficient to our true interiority, we renounce this constitutive foundation of ourselves. Parain's words have a therapeutic function, working to overcome Nana's sense that life is disappointing and false because it is estranged from an ideal, transcendent, non-linguistic truth.

Yet Parain agrees with Nana that living without language, though impossible, is nonetheless *desirable*. "Je suis toujours frappé," he says, "par ceci: on ne peut pas vivre sans parler." "Pourtant ce serait agréable de vivre sans parler," Nana responds. "Oui, ça serait beau, hein?" Parain agrees. "C'est comme si on s'aimerait plus. Seulement, c'est pas possible, on n'y est jamais arrivé." In place of this ideal but inaccessible life beyond language, Parain offers an account of how to live with the necessary detachment, loss, and disappointment that language brings into being, and which he recognizes as necessary to any living reflection upon life:

> Parler c'est presqu'une resurrection par rapport à la vie en ce sens que, quand on parle c'est une autre vie que quand on ne parle pas, vous comprenez? Et alors, pour vivre en parlant, il faut avoir passé par la mort de la vie sans parler. […] On balance entre le silence et la parole parce que c'est le mouvement de la vie qui est que, on est dans la vie quotidienne, et puis on s'en élève vers une vie – appelons-la supérieure, c'est pas bête de le dire, parce que c'est la vie avec la pensée. Mais cette vie avec la pensée suppose qu'on a tué la vie trop quotidienne, la vie trop élémentaire.

Parain's words call on Nana to have the courage to live by abandoning the fantasy of a pre-linguistic immediacy, committing to the work of living and establishing truth and

meaning through how she lives. But as we have just seen, Parain still sees language as inadequate to articulating absolute truth, and his therapeutic lessons are given in the name of accepting that one cannot have the plenitude of nonlinguistic and infinite truth that one desires. In his major work of 1942, *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage*, Parain expresses such a position explicitly; the book ends with the statement that "le langage n'est qu'un moyen pour nous attirer vers son contraire, qui est le silence et qui est Dieu."[31] Emerging both in Parain's scene in the film and in his published work is the strange combination of a veneration and a denigration of language: while a life prior to language is inferior because it lacks self-consciousness, a life that would be beyond language stands as the ideal of language itself. Silence, or God, stands as the figure of an ideal and infinitely deferred reconciliation between life and thought, in whose absence we must make our way to convey what truth we can of this ideal state, while knowing our insufficiency with respect to it. The principle that the possession of ultimate truth beyond language is the ultimate desire is thus not challenged by Parain, who instead offers Nana therapeutic advice on how to live in the absence of such ideal possession.

This scene ends on an evocation of love as a possible "solution" to the difficulty of living, with Parain declaring that one can only learn through deception and disappointment what one really loves: "L'amour est une solution," he tells Nana, "mais à la condition qu'il soit vrai." We then shift to the opening of Tableau 12, the film's one scene of love and happiness, with Nana at home with the unnamed young man. Most significantly, for the brief length of this scene *Vivre sa vie* turns into a silent film, as if fulfilling Nana's wish to live in silence: the simple, contented dialogue of the two lovers ("On va au Luxembourg ne rien faire?") is reported in subtitles, appearing to offer an ideal realisation of Nana's desire for

[31] Brice Parain, *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* (Gallimard, 1942), 234.

silent communication without residue or uncertainty, through the "specialness" of true love. As such, and as Silverman and Farocki propose, this love scene that precedes Nana's death appears to offer the most pronounced instance of Nana's fantasy of identification and specialness, which the brutality of the subsequent conclusion will disabuse her of.

Silent film has, however, already been evoked at an earlier point in the film, when Nana enters a cinema and watches Carl Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. This scene also foreshadows the film's ending, by establishing Nana's proximity to death through her visible identification with Joan. In an extended sequence that moves between shots from Dreyer's film and Nana's reaction shots, a symmetry emerges between the two women's faces, as Godard shoots Karina in a close-up nearly mirroring Dreyer's close-ups on Renée Falconetti, with Joan's tears while she is prepared for death at the stake matched by tears on Nana's wide-eyed face as she regards the scene. A subtitle shows Joan maintaining her commitment to God and preparedness to die, stating that the "grande victoire" will be her "martyre," and her "délivrance" will be "la mort": as the scene moves between this on-screen subtitle in the Dreyer film and the shot of Nana watching, a clear link is established between the fates of the two women: Nana, also, is fated to die, and the film marks her death in advance as a form of martyrdom. As such, *Vivre sa vie* does not only link silence to an imagined specialness and identification in love, but equally to death and the unravelling of all identity.

The argument I am trying to trace here is that the relations of meaning established in the film cannot be adequately understood through the dualisms established by both Sontag and Silverman and Farocki, which place categories such as identity, specialness, or love on the one, bad side, and disidentification, impersonality, goodness, and death on the other, good side. As we have just seen, the figure of silence – whose importance in the film is attended to

by Silverman and Farocki themselves – is demonstrably used to evoke *both* love and death, both specialness and its disintegration, both identification and disidentification. When Silverman and Farocki discuss this figure of silence as it emerges in the love scene near the end of the film, they aptly show that "Godard means us to understand" this silence "as the language of love," a love that "is the condition, par excellence, of 'specialness'," in opposition to which stand impersonality, self-destruction, and death. What they fail to remark in this moment is that the latter are *also* evoked by silence and the form of the silent film, such that the poetics of *Vivre sa vie* in no way place silence on one side of this opposition and against the other, but rather show silence to be proper both to the enchanted space of romance and specialness and to the emptiness of death as the annihilation of all distinctness. As the analogy between Nana and Joan of Arc clearly establishes, it is precisely in relation to her *specialness* that Nana has been *chosen to die*: specialness and death are not opposed but are united in the play of terms the film establishes. What these critics of the film have understood as a dualism, between whose opposing terms one would simply need to choose the good as a renunciation of everything upheld by the bad, can instead be understood as a dialectic, one which reveals an unexpected unity between the opposing terms that it presents, so as to overcome the limitations of both. *Vivre sa vie* does not ask us to choose death over an ideal life, or impersonality over the fantasy of specialness, but rather shows that each of these opposing terms represents a failure of the relationality that sustains life – life, which is the film's ultimate, though obscure, subject.

7. "La mort n'est pas une conclusion": Godard's Modernist Tragedy

Overcoming the dualisms of those readings of *Vivre sa vie* which claim that its modernist aesthetics are tied to a valorisation of death and self-destruction allows us both to recognise

Nana's death as tragic, and to open up the question of the form that tragedy takes in the context of a modernism which operates in a world that lacks any given meaning. The analogy that the film draws between Nana and Joan of Arc raises the question of the difference between a religious tragedy and a secular one, between a world in which God's presence can grant one the certainty that one has been *chosen* and that one's death will serve a higher purpose, and an unmade world that does not offer any such certainty.

Søren Kierkegaard argues that modern tragedy finds itself in crisis because modern cultures no longer believe in fate, or in a guilt that accrues to individuals from their family lineage – conceptions upon which ancient tragedy was grounded. Instead, in modernity, Kierkegaard suggests, we recognise the individual as autonomous, without fated determinants, and in this context "no immediacy is left at all," in the sense that the hero cannot fail to be self-conscious, but knows himself and is taken by society to be responsible for his own actions, and is therefore marked by *guilt* in a more absolute way than an unknowing, fated tragic hero such as Oedipus. "Therefore," Kierkegaard concludes, "modern tragedy has no epic foreground, no epic remainder. The hero stands and falls entirely on his own deeds."[32]

Insofar as the modernism of *Vivre sa vie* (made more than a hundred years after Kierkegaard's attempt to characterise the modern) refuses to show a psychological interiority or self-consciousness – as Sontag emphasises in her reading – this theory of modern tragedy may not appear pertinent to it. But, as Sontag also emphasises, *Vivre sa vie* is a film resolutely concerned with deeds, with the priority of what people *do*, and it is this that recalls

[32] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part 1*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), 143-4.

Kierkegaard's account of modern tragedy: what matters is not that we be shown Nana's self-conscious thoughts, but that her actions be open to assessment on their own terms, rather than as expressions of an external and universal meaning that precedes them (as in ancient tragedy, where the hero's actions lead this hero to a fate that has been established in advance).

This relates directly to the question of the death of the tragic hero(ine), for once this pre-given and external meaning to an individual's actions is taken away, so too is the meaning and redemptive power of their death. The classical tragic hero lacks the freedom of being responsible for his own actions, for fate precedes and determines what this individual does: this is what makes his death meaningful, as the expression of a truth that goes beyond himself, that precedes him and will go on after him – the fate of a clan or a people, the House of Atreas or the House of Thebes. The modern hero's death, by contrast, is not *for* anything, because his or her life expresses no truth beyond that of this concrete individual, and nothing of this individual's acts promises to survive their death, since these acts and their meaning belong to this individual alone. The freedom and responsibility of the modern individual – speaking still in the terms of Kierkegaard's text – is thus inseparable from the radical erasure that this individual meets in death. Since nothing external to us guides our actions, and responsibility for them rests solely with ourselves, nothing can ever assure us that we *are* 'special,' as Nana wishes to be; but, equally, since this aura of specialness has no clear authority (for there is no God to confirm it), it is always possible that one might attain it oneself, by *acting* a certain way.

Here we encounter the dual sense of 'acting,' as both the freedom and responsibility of the individual, and as (potentially false or artificial) performance. If Sontag is right to say

that Godard institutes a crucial shift in cinema by prioritising action and proof over explanation, this has to do with the ambivalent way in which a modern art takes up the void left by fate and religion: since nothing assures us that one life is greater or more meaningful than another, everything comes down to what people do, and the *proof* of what they do, in the way their actions are shown; art has the power to make anyone special through its manner of presenting them, of proving their actions (as Flaubert can make the life of a Norman farmer's daughter the object of the richest artistic presentation), but this power is, and knows itself to be, also a power of artifice. If art can make anyone special through its manner of depicting them, this in itself implicitly undermines the individual's claim to specialness, and modernist works are perpetually engaged in this dialectic, finding opportunities to undermine the centrality or specialness of the figures that appear within them. Flaubert tells his readers, before the main part of his story begins, that the events he is about to depict have had no lasting impact on the world; the novel ends with a compact account of the complete erasure of every trace of its heroine's life from the earth in the years between her death and the time of the present of Flaubert's writing, and the immiseration and anonymisation of her only surviving relative, her daughter.

Nana, similarly, is both erased and prioritised, finally prioritised through the depiction of her erasure – killed in the most brutal and arbitrary fashion, left forgotten on the side of the road, she is then re-prioritised by Godard's camera in a manner that draws attention to its own artifice, tilting downwards to reposition her in the centre of the frame. If art has the power to make anyone special, it also knows that this power is one of artifice, and for art to reflect on itself is also to reflect on its prioritisation of certain individuals, punishing its own fictional characters and their audience for believing uncritically in this specialness. Cinema has the power to posit a link between Joan and Nana through a montage which places one's

face in juxtaposition to the other's; but this is a power whose arbitrariness is tangible, inasmuch as it can pair any face with any other, without any necessary reason or validity. If Joan was chosen by God, Nana has been chosen only by Godard.

For Joan, there is no doubt that she has been chosen, or that her tragedy serves a higher end, an end which grants her the endurance to submit to torture and humiliation from her judges. But since nothing in the world grants such meaning and purpose to Nana's life or death, the film has to do the work of establishing it, of magnifying her prominence by framing her, lighting her, dressing her, editing her image, even while showing *that* it is doing this, that it is intervening to grant her a specialness that is not given by any supernatural force which would guarantee eternal recognition, but may be erased just as abruptly as it has been granted. One of the most insightful moments in Silverman and Farocki's dialogue on the film speaks to this point: Farocki remarks that whereas once, "God was believed to select a few people for great and meaningful things—people like the illiterate Jeanne d'Arc," today "one's appearance can be a vocation: a vocation which the bearer of the face cannot understand, but has to follow."[33] The link suggested by the film between Joan and Nana's faces – the faces of Falconetti and Karina – establishes, for both Nana and the viewer, that Nana *may* attain specialness through nothing other than the magic of *photogénie*, the interest and enthusiasm inspired by her face as shown in a certain light and with a certain framing; but it equally shows that this attainment will always be open to question. Since there is no God to whom we can point as the source of the signs of our chosenness that we look for, this specialness now can potentially belong to anyone who works at cultivating their *look*, a look that will inspire the enthusiasm of the public; but since in the modern context such attainment is achieved through work, vocation, appearance, performance, and reception, it will never be fixed or

[33] Silverman and Farocki, *Speaking About Godard*, 12.

guaranteed. Joan may be mocked by her judges for believing she has received signs from God, but having God as a point of reference allows her to evoke an authority beyond their earthly and corruptible one, and provides her with certainty that she has received signs from Him; in Nana's world, there is only the vague and mercurial choice of producers, photographers, and the mass public that might bestow upon her the specialness of fame, who express this choice through quantities of ticket sales and magazine purchases.

This priority of *work* upon oneself as a response to the uncertainty of a world without God adds a dimension to the meaning of Nana's rejection of her supposed "goodness" as "catholique," in the conversation with Raoul discussed above: this rejection corresponds first of all to the secular sense of the term to mean *universal* (which survives in the English usage of 'catholic' with a lower-case 'c' to mean all-encompassing and eclectic), which Nana rejects because what she wants is recognition of herself as *particular* (as special). But it also indicates Nana's commitment to the protestant work ethic, the belief that she may become worthy of being chosen if she persists in working on herself, readying herself for the ambiguous signs that the world may offer of her chosenness but which she will never be sure of, in distinction from the Catholic externalisation of God and truth to which Joan appeals – a shift in the understanding of destiny brought about by the Reformation which, as Max Weber famously argues, is an initial step towards the "spirit of capitalism" and secularisation.[34] Under these circumstances, one's work is never done, because there is no stable Other who guarantees that one has been chosen, and thus death offers no certainty that anything will survive, that one's life and death will have served a purpose.[35]

[34] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Penguin, 2002).
[35] This idea that to be chosen or deemed special in a secular context depends on the work that one does of course has a particular resonance with respect to femininity, where – as Nana's case shows – the attainment of this status is perpetually made a matter of working to attain and maintain a certain look, a certain manner, that will be liked; as Beauvoir remarks, "The most beautiful woman is never sure of tomorrow, because her weapons are magic, and magic is capricious."

If the world is an unmade one, then our selves are disordered, cast adrift in a maelstrom of temporal change, ambiguity and uncertainty, with no whole, undiluted or incorruptible version of ourselves awaiting final and absolute recognition beyond this secular world, and we are compelled to perpetually reassemble ourselves, to give ourselves some provisional order that we will work to maintain and re-form over time. Life is now bound by the duality of promising perpetually *more*, perpetually new opportunities and possibilities, while never offering resolution or completion, such that Weber, for one, will lament that death has ceased to be a "meaningful phenomenon" for modern individuals.[36] Where in a religious or "enchanted" world death was, according to Weber, a summation of life and a folding back into the infinite, now death is nothing other than the radical interruption of all meaning and all existence. If the film suggests an identity through death between Joan and Nana – the cinema sequence ending with their faces linked via the subtitle "La mort," anticipating that Joan's fate will be Nana's – this identity ultimately reveals a difference, inasmuch as the "deliverance" from the sufferings of life that Joan looks forward to in death through God's mercy and protection is not available to Nana, to whom death offers nothing but interruption and erasure. Modernist tragedy shows that one can die purposelessly and without redemption, but in doing this, art reveals its own demiurgic power to make anyone special, a subject of tragedy. The combined narrative arbitrariness and formal necessity of Nana's death – the fact that the narrative procedure leading to her death is but vaguely coherent, while everything in the film's manner of presentation prepares us for it – acts as an ironic commentary upon the fact that the deaths with which tragedies conclude are never natural or necessary, but are always a choice inflicted upon the character by the artist; and

[36] Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Routledge, 2009), 139-40.

this further serves to reveal that death does not offer the conclusion, the sense of finality and consummation, as "a resolved chord at the end of a melody,"[37] that it may have appeared to offer in an "enchanted" world.

"La mort n'est pas une conclusion": one year after *Vivre sa vie*, Godard places these words in the mouth of legendary filmmaker Fritz Lang, who plays himself in Godard's *Le mépris*. Nearly all of Godard's films of this period – including *Le mépris* itself – end with the more or less arbitrary deaths of at least one of their central characters. The arbitrariness of these deaths itself attests to the fact that "death is not a conclusion," emphasising that there is nothing beautiful or conclusive about death but that it is rather simply the ultimate interruption; but it also tells us that if death is not a conclusion, then Godard's films themselves do not conclude, but simply end, and they end not by bringing the preceding events to a satisfying climax, but rather simply by annihilating them, tearing everything down, reminding the spectator not to get attached to the story or the characters, or to look for the comfort of a conclusion. This iconoclastic and 'Brechtian' side of Godard is well-known, but it is worth bringing up here in response to claims that his films revere death as a figure of disidentification. Far from revering death, Godard strives to create an art that takes seriously the *limit* that death imposes, an art that reflects on what *life* is once we understand that it finds no conclusion in death, but only an interruption, an end.[38]

Such an art will also give a distinct response to the problem of art's own access to, or possession of, the depicted world: for to recognise that a life does not bear the unity of a story

[37] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 533. Sartre of course is here rejecting this conception of death – a conception that Weber would endorse, lamenting its unavailability to modern subjects.
[38] Even the term 'end' can connote the positivity of a conclusion, with the sense of an end as a goal; and so 'end' here should be heard in the sense of *Ende* rather than *Ziel*, to draw a distinction that exists in German but not in English or French.

to which death would be the conclusion is to recognise that life cannot be captured or possessed in knowledge as a finished unity, that to try to gain such possessive knowledge of life is precisely to kill it. This tragedy of the possessiveness of the artist – which is also very much a "tragedy of heterosexuality,"[39] to borrow a phrase from Jane Ward – is allegorised in *Vivre sa vie*, most explicitly in the middle section of the final sequence, immediately prior to the death scene, where Nana's lover reads to her (though the voice we hear is in fact Godard's, in voiceover) Charles Baudelaire's translation of Edgar Allan Poe's story, "The Oval Portrait."

This story, of an artist obsessed with painting the ideal, living portrait of his wife and muse, concludes with his discovery, upon completing her portrait, that his real wife is dead. Poe's story provides an obvious allegory for the film's own meditation on the problem of possession, and for the relationship between Godard himself and Anna Karina, his wife and star: in his effort to capture the woman's life as his creation and possession, the man destroys the one he loves. Such is the ineluctable plight of the artist, Poe's story and Godard's repetition of it seem to tell us: to desire what is most alive and to kill it in the process of seeking it. Following this scene, Nana's real death comes almost as an afterthought, the completion of a formal process already set in motion, as if it were, like in Poe's story, the necessary outcome of the film's own attempt to possess her. The distinction between fiction and reality here becomes increasingly ambiguous, as Godard himself speaks as Nana's lover, telling her, "C'est notre histoire: un peintre qui fait le portrait de sa femme" – here Godard is speaking to Karina as much as the young lover is speaking to Nana.

[39] Jane Ward, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (NYU Press, 2020).

Vivre sa vie takes the parable of the artist killing the life he makes into art in a more radical direction than Poe's story, however, by applying this insight *to itself*: it is not merely a character in the story who is guilty of murder, but the film and its director. Godard makes this all the more explicit by emphasising the presence of the recording apparatus throughout the film, but most starkly at the ending, in the moments after Nana's death, as the camera tilts sharply downward to reposition her in the centre of the frame. The film engages in this autocritique of the logic of possession – anticipated already at the end of the film's opening sequence, with the story of the chicken whose outside and whose inside have to be removed in order to reveal its soul – but the film ends without any hope that such a logic can be overcome. Nana's corpse is presented as a reminder of the violence of the possessive demand, but no sign is given that art can exist without such a demand or the death that it requires.

The same theme, the same tragedy of art as inseparably a tragedy of heterosexuality, recurs often in Godard's films, nowhere more prominently than in *Le mépris*. During that film's central scene, which initiates the unravelling of the marriage of Paul (Michel Piccoli) and Camille (Brigitte Bardot), Camille reads aloud from a book of Lang's writings and interviews, reciting a passage which makes explicit this point about the impotent violence of the masculine demand for possession through the finality of death: "Le crime passionnel ne sert à rien. Je suis amoureux d'une femme; elle me trompe; je la tue. Alors, que me reste-t-il? J'ai perdu mon amour puisqu'elle est morte. Si je tue son amant, elle me déteste et je perds encore son amour. Tuer ne peux jamais être une solution." Instead of privileging the drama of the revenge and murder plot, the citation from Lang here emphasises the loss that such plots result in, and the error of the search for conclusiveness through the dramatic action of

murder, by reminding us of the time *after* the murder, the time after the 'conclusion', in which the hollowness of one's imagined victory is revealed.[40]

In both *Vivre sa vie* and *Le mépris*, femininity stands on the side of life, defined in opposition to the death that is – tragically, but seemingly inevitably – brought by masculine knowledge and possession. There is no masculine without the feminine, these films suggest, no effort at possession without something living that evades possession and that dies if one pushes this effort too far; but equally, since art is only possible through a distancing from life – as Parain remarks in his scene in the film that "cette vie avec la pensée" constituted by language "suppose qu'on a tué la vie trop quotidienne" – life also cannot appear without becoming an object of a possessive gaze that will destroy it, and the feminine thus cannot appear other than to be both adored and destroyed by the masculine. Feminine and masculine are thus marked by the tragic, seemingly inescapable dualisms of life/death, truth/knowledge, presence/distance, passive/active.

The long scene that takes up the middle section of *Le mépris* stages the confrontation between husband and wife in terms of the irresolvability of these structuring oppositions. Paul insists on knowing what has changed between them, and insists that Camille admit that she no longer loves him. He demands to know the woman, even as the very dualism he participates in and within which his desire is caught defines 'woman' as such as mysterious and unknowable: that which he demands, to possess her as an object of knowledge, would

[40] *That* revenge killing ends in tragedy is not itself an original insight of Lang's (or Godard's), but is long-recognised as an essential form of the tragic. What is significant, both about Lang's words and about Godard's inclusion of them in a film about the occupation of roles and the problem of how to act in the world, is that by making reflection upon this problem explicit, they introduce an uncertainty and self-criticism into the 'natural' sense of right which constitutes the revenge plot and culminates in tragedy: one cannot continue to 'naturally' act out this plot once it has been explicated in this way, and tragedy now has something to do with this problem of being held by destructive desires such as vengeance while knowing too much to continue to believe that acting on them serves the end of natural right, or that one will be satisfied in carrying them out (as the fulfillment of one's 'natural' tasks).

equally destroy her as an object of love. Filmed in the widescreen CinemaScope format – which, earlier in the film, Lang has remarked is suitable only for filming serpents or funerals, as opposed to scenes of human interaction – *Le mépris* is haunted by the distances between people even in the most intimate settings, nowhere moreso than in this central dispute between Paul and Camille, where a lamp on the table at which they sit across from each other stands as a great chasm separating them. The opposition between masculine and feminine, in this vision, is at once what is necessary for a relation between the two poles, and what ensures that it is a non-relation: the woman must be beyond the man's knowledge and possession in order that he may desire to attain them, and when he does so he either destroys or repels her. She is on the side of the living, the fleeting, the untamed, and man's pursuit of her is linked to cinema's pursuit of reality, in what André Bazin once called its "virginal purity."[41]

In *Masculin féminin: 15 faits précis* (1966), this opposition is reasserted in relation to the question of documentary cinema and the possibility of filming the present. Near the end of the film, yet another Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud) laments the failure of his effort to document the views and opinions of the people he interviews in his job as a pollster, observing that, while the "vraie mission" of surveys should be "l'observation du comportement," they invariably shift "à la recherche d'un jugement de valeur." This shift from observation to value judgement is equally a shift from present to past: because he uses a pre-established language and set of ideas in his interactions with his subjects and in the language of the questions he poses to them, Paul recognises that he himself has remained bound to "une idéologie qui ne correspondait pas aux mœurs actuelles, mais à celles d'hier, du passé."

[41] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 1967), 15.

Paul's disappointed desire for a cinema that would be united with life ("Ce film qu'on aurait voulu faire – ou, plus secrètement, sans doute, que nous aurions voulu vivre," he says earlier in voiceover) corresponds to his disappointed desire for a woman who evades him: Madeleine (Chantal Goya), who carries on relationships both with him and with Elisabeth, a woman she lives with (unlike Paul, Madeleine appears able to engage in this web of relationships without jealousy or possessiveness). Paul, finally, will join the ranks of those Godardian antiheroes who die stupidly and arbitrarily at the end of the film: he dies off-screen, reported to the police and to the audience by Madeleine and another friend, who explain that he fell out of his apartment while taking photos. The capture of life remains tied to death, the masculine pursuit of the feminine defined unavoidably by possession and destruction: Godard pushes this tension to the point of absurdity, showing repeatedly how self-destructive this pursuit is.

These examples of art and of heterosexual coupling as parallel tragedies of possession are consistent with a certain critique of identity, which has been observed in my reading of *Vivre sa vie*: just as Nana is punished for wanting to possess a fixed and permanent identity as special, famous, or loved, so the viewer is punished for wanting to possess her as an object of attention, adoration, and knowledge – as an *identified object*. But whereas scholars such as those discussed above have seen this critique of the possessiveness of identity to entail the veneration of non-identity, dissolution, and death, my aim is to show that a more dynamic and dialectical logic is at work in how Godard presents and allows us to think about these relations of identity and non-identity, self and other, subject and object. Far from venerating non-identity and death, Godard shows that the desire for these states is but a mirror image of the desire for specialness and for the fullness of an absolute, static identity: both sides of this antinomy offer a retreat from the temporal and uncertain condition of life, seeking relief in

the dissolution of the tension that persists between oneself and the resistance and receptivity that one finds in the world. That one may "see" Nana's "soul" only when she is lifeless does not make of her death a virtue, a justified triumph of "goodness" over "specialness," but rather tells us that to separate this soul from a living activity in which it is always mediated (by language, time, sociality) is to destroy its every capacity, to make of it something as static and alienated from life as the photographed image of Nana is from Nana herself. The parable of the chicken near the beginning of the film – "La poule est un animal qui se compose de l'extérieur et de l'intérieur: si on enlève l'extérieur il reste l'intérieur; et quand on enlève l'intérieur, alors on voit l'âme" – is not an instruction manual, as readers such as Silverman and Farocki imagine, but a warning: a warning that no relief will come from letting these dimensions of oneself be separated, since there will be no one there to experience this relief; and a warning that no satisfaction will come from performing this dissection upon others, for the recognitive relationship that one seeks to determine by asserting oneself upon them is destroyed in this dismantling of the other's living integrity.

Nana's tragedy is modern in the Kierkegaardian sense that her death has no reason and no higher purpose, and the only clues as to who she is come from the actions she herself performs. The tragic vision of the film is modern*ist* insofar as it implicates itself in this absence of a centre or an assured purpose, as we see in the film's episodic structure, refusing the external narrative logic of beginnings and conclusions that make life into a story in which everything has its right place.[42] But, as I have aimed to show throughout this chapter, this self-referentiality and this attention to the gaps within narrative and within constructed images of the self do not serve a purely derisory end, nor do they propose the dissolution of

[42] Godard famously remarked, when asked by a journalist if he agrees that a story has "a beginning, a middle, and an end," "Yes – but not necessarily in that order." In his films, Godard will go further than this remark in the rethinking of narrative in the absence of an externally established centre.

all identity and of all narrative as the 'good' solution ("killing can never be a solution," as Lang says in the words quoted in *Le mépris*). Rather, Godard's attention to these failings of static and externally fixed forms of identity and of narrative serve to reveal a *living* dynamic at work in relations that have become reified and alienated, namely a dynamic of *recognition*. Beauvoir's description of the stalled recognition that defines relations between men and women, discussed above, finds powerful reflection in Godard's presentation of these relations, in *Vivre sa vie* and elsewhere: the socially instituted definition of woman as "docile freedom," as a possession who wills or affirms her own status as possessed, frames the interactions in Godard's films, and most significantly the self-relation of Nana, who struggles to find some way of living in a world where the only recognition she is offered appears to be through this definition of her as a possession.

What this framing of sexual and gender dynamics in terms of recognition and its interruption allows us to see, however, is that this reified opposition between man and woman, where man sees the establishment of his own identity and status through the possession of woman, is intrinsically unstable and self-undermining, because the dualistic opposition it proclaims belies a desire for recognition that dissolves such static identities. In the recognition that man only *is* man through the possession of woman, there is a recognition that what he desires is the living recognition of an equal who assents freely to his self-definition, but who has the capacity to refuse it and to challenge and threaten him. If one can only be oneself through the recognition of the other, the reified identities by which one defines oneself are not only unstable but intrinsically undesirable, since they suppress the living recognition that one seeks from others as soon as one gives oneself any self-definition. Nana's pursuit of a reified identity or specialness through fame or love falls aground because of its misrecognition of the social nature of the identity and the form of recognition from

others that she desires. The undermining of this pursuit that the film enacts upon her does not offer the dissolution of all identity, all definitions of self, as the virtuous answer to such a failure, but only shows that the recognition one seeks is only possible through a commitment to the uncertainty and sociality of life, from which the fantasies of pure self-identity and pure self-dissolution both retreat.

8. Deleuze and Cinema After the Organic

One of the most significant theoretical accounts of the distinctness of a cinematic modernism is that of Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Deleuze proposes that modern cinema of the post-World War Two era presents a world that has become disconnected from the purposive action of human agents, and from the stories or myths through which these agents collectively constitute this world's coherence. If classical cinema is tied to an "organic regime" of images which "assumes the independence of its object" – that is, which assumes that an image is secondary to a primary object *of which* it is an image, that it "stands for a supposedly pre-existing reality" – then modern cinema throws this regime into crisis by problematising this distinction between cinematic *description* and that which is *described*, between image and object, representation and represented. These are "crystalline descriptions" which "constitute their own object," and unlike the organic descriptions of classical cinema, they "refer to purely optical and sound situations detached from their motor extension: this is a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent [*de voyant, non plus d'actant*]."[43]

[43] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 122-3.

The cinema of the agent or actor is (or was) one in which the world is organised into a 'pre-existing' unity by the "sensory-motor schema," which gives the subject of experience a purposive and active orientation towards the world: by acting in the world with a purpose that links my perceptions to my affections and these to my actions, I experience this world as stable and self-sufficient, pre-existing my engagements with it. When this sensory-motor schema breaks down, however, we move to the "cinema of the seer," in which the audiovisual "description" itself is what "constitutes the sole decomposed and multiplied object," which has no existence other than this creative constitution of it which adds endless layers to its complexity with no reference back to a prior reality, no pre-existing status as real.[44] These new images are crystalline because they unite in the form of a single image the opposed forces of actual and virtual, real and imaginary, present and past, such that these distinct forces become "indiscernible," and the actual ceases to hold any priority over the virtual. Deleuze's general name for this phenomenon is "the powers of the false,"[45] a concept which itself renews the concepts of the simulacrum and the "reversal of Platonism" from his own early philosophy.[46] What is at stake in these concepts is the indiscernibility between the true and the false, which brings about the priority of images and their unending plasticity, without any pre-existing reality to which these images would refer. This amounts to a regime of the seer, rather than one of the actor or agent, because the subject of experience – who can be understood alternately as the film's viewer and as the protagonist through whose eyes the visible world of the film is received – is here detached from any active involvement in the world of a kind that would grant it reliable objectivity, and instead perceives it as an immense accumulation of images interacting and mutating before the stupefied gaze of the inert perceiver.

[44] Ibid., 122.
[45] Ibid., 122-150.
[46] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (Continuum, 2004), 291-303.

Godard is a central reference in Deleuze's account of the distinctness of a modern cinema of the crisis and decline of the sensory-motor schema and of the "action-image," and we can see how *Vivre sa vie* might lend itself to a Deleuzian reading. Deleuze's very use of the term *voyant* refers to the same letter of Rimbaud's from which the statement repeated by Nana – "Je est un(e) autre" – is drawn, and later in *Cinema 2* he will cite this statement as an expression of the narrative logic of modern cinema's powers of the false.[47] The film's episodic structure of twelve "tableaux," announced already in its title, establishes it as a work without a centre, in which the *découpage* of its narrative has something arbitrary and violent about it, corresponding not to a stable and knowable world within which the film takes place, but to the filmmaker's construction of the film-world. Without a narrative direction and development based in the purposive actions of *actants* organising what we perceive, we are spectators upon a world that lacks natural order and that threatens at every moment to disrupt whatever understanding we have of it, to startle us out of whatever sense we have that this world is familiar and inhabitable as the backdrop to a human drama, an organic narrative. Nana seems to adhere to Deleuze's description of the characters of crystalline narratives who, faced with "pure optical and sound situations," "cannot or will not react, so great is their need to 'see' properly what there is in the situation."[48] The situations that the crystalline regime of images presents are ones upon which the individual can form no grip, instead finding themselves withdrawn from purposive action, either contemplating the world intellectually or acting in manic ways disconnected from any narrative context. Nana's experience and behaviour over the course of the film, from her impotent frustration and bitterness at the state

[47] "There is a fundamental reason for this new situation: contrary to the form of the true which is unifying and tends to the identification of a character (his discovery or simply his coherence), the power of the false cannot be separated from an irreducible multiplicity. 'I is another' ['Je est un autre'] has replaced Ego = Ego." Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 129.
[48] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 124.

of her life, to her radical disaffection and disidentification – of which her entry into sex work, at least at first, appears as a continuation – to her vigorous, narratively superfluous, extended dance in the pool hall while she waits for Raoul, to her philosophical reflections on the conditions of her situation in conversation with Parain, is indicative of this disconnection between perception and action, between seeing the world and acting in it, which Deleuze describes as paradigmatic of the modern cinematic regime.

Yet although Deleuze praises the cinema of the crystalline image and the powers of the false, he ultimately sees the loss of the mythic narratives that had once cohered the sensory-motor schema (Hollywood's myth of the American dream, or the Soviet myth of progress towards a classless society) to entail the destruction of a link between human beings and the world which needs to be re-established. Such a re-establishment will not entail belief in a world of the future, as in the Hollywood and Soviet dreams, but belief in the world of the present, in *this* world, overcoming the modern condition which leads us to perceive the world as something foreign, or as a mere set of conventions:

> The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film. … The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. The reaction of which man has been dispossessed can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. … Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world*. It is a whole transformation of belief. It was already a great turning-point in philosophy, from Pascal to Nietzsche: to replace the model of knowledge with the model of belief. But belief replaces knowledge only when it becomes belief in this world, as it is.[49]

For Deleuze, the difference is clear: whereas in classical cinema the link between humanity and the world was established through "reaction," through our sensory-motor capacity to

[49] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 166.

perceive and react to events, today, in the absence of this capacity for reaction amid the destruction of the sensory-motor schema, we must instead establish *belief* in the world, belief in the reality of that which surrounds us, and which we have grown used to seeing as "a bad film," a mere set of banal conventions without sense. We cannot rekindle a lost capacity to "react" to the world, nor the emancipatory, future-oriented dreams that correspond to this sense of our capacities, but must instead establish a new form of belief which would affirm the reality of the world, beyond the bad films and hackneyed scripts of future-oriented stories. Instead of a belief in the society of the future, the task for a cinema that would come after the modern is that of re-establishing belief in the world of the present.

These are some of the most beautiful lines in Deleuze's books on cinema, which make clear the larger philosophical and ethical – if not political – concerns of the project of these books.[50] Most importantly in the context of this dissertation, they provide a particular response to the question of modernity and modernism. If modernity is defined by the severing of those 'natural' ties between humanity and the world encapsulated by the collective stories of classical Hollywood and early Soviet cinema, then an art which answers to modernity will be one which finds a new way of establishing such a tie, which does not simply invent a new story of our capacity to react to and remake the world, or try to repeat the old ones, but which reckons with the death of all such stories, and affirms the world not as that which can be harnessed to purposive human ends, but as an object of belief which exceeds our control or our purposive projects, and which we can re-establish our faith in through a contemplation of its externality to our own agency or purposiveness. For Deleuze, a modern cinema's capacity to reconnect us to the world, through belief or contemplation, is linked to a slackening or

[50] Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience Through Film* (Routledge, 2016), 52-79.

dissolution of subjective purposiveness and activity, such that we can experience our own belonging to the world, rather than our mastery over it as purposive, desiring actors.

In a striking critique of Deleuze's *Cinema* books, J.M. Bernstein argues that Deleuze mischaracterises the distinctiveness of a modern, post-war cinema with respect to 'classical' cinema: rather than entailing a shift from action to inaction, from agency to passivity, or from organic to crystalline, for Bernstein, modern cinema does not abandon the desire and purposiveness of subjectivity, but situates these in a world shorn of all guarantees of success, awakening subjectivity at once to its fragility and to its capacity. As Bernstein powerfully writes, modern cinema "shows that agents must improvise a life that lacks metaphysical comfort or support, that they have only themselves, their capacity for response to one another, in order to make this life possible, at least here, at least now."[51] Bernstein argues that Deleuze's conception of the collapse of the sensory-motor schema in the post-war world and post-war cinema is incoherent, for this schema "is indelible; without it nothing approximating human life is possible."[52] Modern cinema does not entail a collapse of the relationship between perception and action, as Deleuze claims, but a freeing of cinematic narrative from the "mythology" by which classical Hollywood in particular was defined, opening it up instead to a greater richness and complexity, which is tied to the fact that nothing guarantees the outcome or coherence of any narrative, that no pre-existing myth or value can guarantee the meaning or success of a present human action.

For Bernstein, this only heightens the significance of human action in modern cinema, in the recognition that this action and the narrative forms through which it is expressed are

[51] J.M. Bernstein, "Movement! Action! Belief? Notes For a Critique of Deleuze's Cinema Philosophy," *Angelaki* 17:4 (2012), 77-93: 89.
[52] Ibid., 90.

utterly finite, without any mythological or religious guarantee beyond themselves. As such, on Bernstein's account, the concept of belief which Deleuze arrives at near the end of his theory of cinema is drastically insufficient. Purposive and desiring projects – as opposed to the simple affirmation of what is that we have seen privileged not only by Deleuze but by Sontag and by Silverman and Farocki – do not cease at the point at which the myths that once organised the orientation of subjects are put into question, but find under these open and uncertain conditions the very possibility of self-knowledge and self-determination.

9. Belief, Expression, Perceptual Faith

Bernstein himself gives an off-handed, caricatural dismissal of the films of Godard in the midst of his critique of Deleuze, but in truth, I argue, it is through an interrogation of Godard's films that we can grasp the stakes of this philosophical debate.[53] If Godard is among the filmmakers who most radically problematise the narrative structure proper to the "organic regime" of cinema, it is less clear that his films offer the dissolution of the desiring and purposive subject of experience as the answer to this. We can engage further with this question in considering a notable recent reading of *Le mépris* by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, who take up a perspective identified here in different respects with Deleuze, Sontag, and Silverman and Farocki, seeing the highest power of cinema – of which Godard's film is depicted as an exemplary case – to be one of affirmation or belief as a dissolution of all distinctness of the subject of experience into a communion with the visible world.

Bersani and Dutoit read *Le mépris* not only as the story of the dissolution of a couple, but equally as the story of the dissolution of the self. Insofar as relations within a couple

[53] Ibid., 78.

entail "reduc[ing] the desired other to a reflection of the desiring subject," the breakdown of this relationship destroys the form through which each individual constitutes themselves as a self; thus, "Camille's contempt condemns Paul to an unending search in her for the contemptible subject he has become."[54] Bersani and Dutoit consider this "search" constitutive of subjectivity and relations with others to be fundamentally illusory, and they see this falsity of subjective investments to be the essential theme of *Le mépris*. Viewers' "speculations" about the characters "remove us from the film," for "the characters' motivations, unarticulated by them and invented by us, are a substitute for our only legitimate activity: the activity of looking and of registering what we *see*."[55] Bersani and Dutoit affirm (in a manner reminiscent of Sontag's essay) a stark opposition between interpretation, as a speech which can go on indefinitely in drawing out associations, and the visible evidence of film, which stops short all speech and all interpretation:

> With our interpretations we emphasise how expressive their faces are, but expressiveness is perhaps always an exaggeration of expression, the cue for a reading there will be no reason to stop. To interpret the expressive face is to abandon the face that belongs to a visible body.[56]

They claim that the ideal held out by *Le mépris* is that of "non-expressive objects," and that Godard's meta-reflection upon the intrinsic failure and falsity of the search for expressive meaning – which is both the error of the characters, and that of a viewer who moves from the "visible evidence" to interpretation – is what "save[s] his film from being absorbed into, and victimised by, its psychic drama."[57] Referring to Deleuze, Bersani and Dutoit understand his philosophy of cinema to entail a dissolution of all expressive identities, and they claim that it is this dissolution towards which the film is oriented, through its unmaking of the couple and of the selves that constitute (and are constituted by) it.

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[54] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (British Film Institute, 2004), 61.
[55] Ibid., 51.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., 53.

Bersani and Dutoit see the final shot of *Le mépris* as the realisation of this ideal of a cinema without subjective orientations or motivations. In this shot, the camera moves away, both from the film's own fictional drama of Paul and Camille's relationship, and from the drama of the film-within-the-film, Fritz Lang's adaptation of *The Odyssey* (now arrived at the moment of Odysseus' return to Ithaca, in a scene which Lang is here in the process of shooting), to settle finally on an image of the sea meeting the sky, 'undisturbed' by human intervention: such an image of "nature as pure appearance" represents, for Bersani and Dutoit, the achievement of a "non-expressive" cinematic mode.[58] Drawing out the relationship between this ending's apparent eclipse of the human world and the themes of translation and miscommunication central to the film, they suggest that the blurring of priority and identity that these themes introduce – what is the true text and what the copy?; where does one draw the line between one person's intention or action and another person's interpretation of it? – introduce the principle of a dissolution of expressive selves encapsulated by this final shot. Identity is shown to be both the aesthetic and the ethical problem of *Le mépris*, as the identities assigned within the couple are shown to entrap Camille and Paul, while the freedom which could allow them to escape this trap is one of affirming the "open totality" of "possibility," through explicit recognition of the inconclusiveness of their own identities as individuals and as a couple: "By potentialising their relation *while they are in it*," Bersani and Dutoit suggest, Camille and Paul "would have left their condemned coupledom and given to each other the freedom to reappear, always, as subjects too inconclusive, too multiple, too unfinished, ever to be totally loved."[59]

[58] Ibid., 68.
[59] Ibid., 68.

The claim is that both the love-relation of the couple and the interpretative relation taken up by viewers to the faces on screen enact an identifying violence upon the unbounded potentiality of life as a process of constant becoming. The natural light of the sun on the water and the water's reflection of this light with which the film ends is a figure for this "open totality" of an existence which is not marked by the dualisms of interior and exterior, truth and appearance, expressed and expression, and it calls upon human subjects to abandon such divided self-definition by instead affirming their own natural being and the natural light that they themselves "emit," such that there is no distinction between their inner and outer existence, for they affirm their own existence as pure appearance and becoming:

> Now everything is illuminated – not with a light projected artificially onto the scene, but rather by a light from within the elements, a light that comes toward us. We too, Godard's film perhaps ultimately suggests, might also emit light, a light hidden behind psychic darkness, blocked by our expressive being. To lose our fascinating and crippling expressiveness might be the precondition for our moving as appearances registering, and responding to the call of, other appearances.[60]

Whereas the "demand for love" is a demand for identity through the other's recognition, which necessarily always fails since we are always in a process of becoming, the alertness of non-identitarian life to its own becoming and openness allows for an escape from this demand and an access to an affirmative mode of living unbound by such fixity.

Bersani and Dutoit's text attends to many of the features of Godard's cinema that I have emphasised here: what they describe in terms of the resistance of the visible to the fixity of identities approaches the set of questions explored in this chapter with regard to possession as a problem for art, where the achievement of an absolute possession, or the final fixing of the identity of the object of possession, would sunder possession itself. And indeed, the account they provide of the "inconclusive" nature of every subject, and the self-conscious

[60] Ibid., 70.

embrace of one's own becoming that they identify as an answer to this inconclusiveness of the self, shows some similarity to the perspective developed throughout this chapter and this dissertation. But what I have presented as a dynamic – between possessor and possessed, subject and object, desiring and desired – whose very form is relational and engaged in the sociality of contestation, Bersani and Dutoit present as a dualism, between identities and the open, between the fixity of forms and the indeterminacy of matter or the visible. Their suggestion that love is an identitarian trap from which living beings need to be released rests on the idea that our failure "ever to be totally loved" constitutes a flaw or lack at the heart of love itself, as if love could only be understood in the asocial and atemporal form of the 'total,' or what I have here and in Chapter One described as the recognition of the ideal other. But as was argued then, such ideal recognition turns out to be no recognition at all. The notions of becoming and "potentialising" that Bersani and Dutoit offer in opposition to the fixity of identities are similarly dualistic, and the only self-consciousness such notions appear to provide is that of a pure affirmation of what is, which amounts to a self-conscious effort to annihilate self-consciousness in the embrace of pure becoming.

We can avoid Bersani and Dutoit's dualisms, however, if we see that the inconclusiveness and temporal openness of the love-relation and of the individuals who constitute it is not a failing, but rather the very form of love, just as a negative capability with respect to one's own identity is the very form of identity, rather than its undermining. It is because we can never be "totally loved," because we are in a constant state of becoming rather than the inert form of an object that could be possessed in a single glance, that we can love and be loved at all, offering our love as a promise and a commitment to someone whom we do not entirely know, and who has the potential to disappoint or betray our love: if this potential were not there, if a state of "total love" and pure, ideal recognition were inhabitable,

then there would be no reason to declare love or to act upon it, since one would simply be *in* it without any remainder. While Bersani and Dutoit claim that the failure of love as possession and self-possession constitutes the error of love as such, it is rather the possessive mode that betrays love's intrinsic embrace of uncertainty, which even the most destructive form of possessive love remains tacitly bound to, revealing as much when it demands of the beloved that they willingly assent to the love that is offered them.[61] Bersani and Dutoit's privileging of the purity of appearances over the (false) depth of expressive identities runs aground in their very description of appearances as "registering, and responding to the call of, other appearances," because here they reveal that such "appearances," in order to relate to anything outside themselves, must be engaged in a self-relation, must know themselves in relation to others, and must therefore have some form of identity. Bersani and Dutoit's dualisms cannot be sustained by their reading of the film, for what they want to call non-identity, non-expressivity, non-interpretation, non-recognition, and non-relation cannot fail to turn into that which these terms oppose as soon as they are named and given some conceptual determinacy. The non-expressive only has meaning in relation to the expressive, just as silence is determinable only in relation to sound; as soon as one begins to talk about the relations into which a non-expressive life enters, the question of expression resurfaces and the concept of non-expression undermines itself, for to relate is to express something to an other.

This understanding of expression further shows the inadequacy of the dualistic approach taken by Bersani and Dutoit to identity, for it is precisely the concept of expression that allows us to understand how individuals differ from themselves in the very activity of living: if we are expressive beings, this is because no identity is accomplished without an

[61] As Sartre points out, even the sadist demands the other's willing submission in order that their desire be satisfied. *Being and Nothingness*, 517-526.

activity through which we express ourselves and thereby differ from who we (thought we) were. Whereas Bersani and Dutoit treat the notion of expression as a 'Platonic' secondary appearance or copy relative to a stable idea or identity, and envision in opposition to this dual structure a world of pure appearances (or simulacra) that would have no need of expression, they themselves tacitly acknowledge that appearances have to engage in an expressive relation to themselves and their outside in order to be determinable at all. The notion of expression is crucial to the conception of identity as constitutively *out of place* elaborated throughout this dissertation, for it shows that to be someone *is* to express oneself, an expression which introduces a difference, making me differ from who I (thought I) was prior to this act. The "open totality" that Bersani and Dutoit wish for is only conceivable in terms of the perpetual differing from and constituting of oneself through expression that is the very form of identity.

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Merleau-Ponty, like Deleuze, also places great emphasis on belief, or faith, through his central concept of perceptual faith. Perceptual faith, however, offers a strikingly different answer to the relationship between perception and the perceived world than we find in Deleuze's notion of belief, Sontag and Silverman and Farocki's notions of affirmation, or Bersani and Dutoit's conception of the immanent and subjectless light of the world. For perceptual faith establishes an inextricable link between those two poles which these theorists wish to separate: namely, between perception and the self-conscious orientation of a subject in relation to the perceived world. For Merleau-Ponty, *reflection* – a subject's questioning relationship towards the world they perceive and interact with – is itself revealed to be dependent upon a perceptual faith which precedes and underlies it: even when we put the things of our perception in doubt, Merleau-Ponty argues, we do so by *correcting* our perceptions, by establishing a *better* determination of the things we

perceive, by learning more about them and our modes of interaction with them. Even in the most radical doubt, I am always projecting a social and perceptual world in which my words of doubt will be heard, a world which will be better aligned with my sense of it. Whereas Deleuze claims that the link between humanity and the world has been severed, such that we no longer believe in the things we perceive, which have become utterly conventionalised and senseless (like the events of a film of someone else's life), for Merleau-Ponty, this disbelief or doubt is never separable from the faith that persists within it, the faith in the world as having more to offer us than we currently know. When something looks wrong about the things we perceive, or when we start to sense a disconnection between our perceptions and the concepts we have been bringing to them, we *look harder*, so as to gain a better sense of where we may have gone wrong in our assessment of what we were looking at.[62] Everything that we are denied in perception we seek in the refinement and renewal of perception; and this means that there is no perception that is truly or fundamentally disbelieving.

Both Deleuze and Bersani and Dutoit want to replace disbelief with belief, which presumes that there could ever be an *absolute* form of either: if absolute disbelief would be a severing of the tie between humanity and the world, absolute belief offers a merging so complete that 'we' are nothing but the contemplation of the world, with no purposive, living perspective or orientation of our own. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, there can neither be absolute belief nor absolute disbelief, for to perceive at all is to be engaged in a relationship of faith that is unendingly *questioning*, seeking out more information about the world and about our own unbreakable tie to it. Disbelief is only possible *because* we believe that there is a world in which we can be heard, because we can relate negatively towards *this* particular circumstance we are confronted with by projecting *another* form of the perceived world that

[62] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 40.

would correct it, that would improve upon it. Such 'improvement' is irreducibly both epistemological and normative, both 'is' and 'ought,' both a matter of our understanding of the world and a matter of our redetermination of it in light of our own ends, for every investigation of what is outside ourselves is equally a search for a better way to align the world with our sense of how it ought to be – a search that is constitutively unending and incompletible. We do not need "reasons to believe in this world," for our disbelief itself reveals that we have never lost them; we do not need to replace knowledge with belief, for our most constitutive relationship to the world is that of a belief or faith in it as beyond our present knowledge, a relationship which we continually work to better determine through a knowledge that is always provisional.[63] There is no belief in the world "as it is," because to believe is to project oneself and one's capacities towards a world that responds to and is changed by one's presence to and engagement with it, and to perceive is already to enact this belief and this projection.

In Chapter One, we saw Merleau-Ponty's response to a radical suspension of the connection of subjects to the world, expressed in another citation from Rimbaud: not "Je est un autre," but "Nous ne sommes pas au monde." For Merleau-Ponty, "if we put all things in doubt and all beliefs in suspension," we "succeed in catching sight" of "the horizon of our particular engagements" and "the power of something in general that is the phantom of the world."[64] This "power of something in general" is what rises to the surface of consciousness when our capacity to engage actively with the world appears sapped: rather than enter a state of detachment from the world while still (somehow) being present to ourselves, this experience of detachment is the recognition that we cannot *not* be in the world, the

[63] Merleau-Ponty, "Faith and Good Faith," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, 172-181.
[64] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 430 / 1111 (trans. mod.).

recognition that in suspending my previous engagements, my previous ways of being held and of holding the world, reveals only the horizon of possible engagements, awakening me to the fact that experience itself takes place only through and in terms of a commitment, a faith, a certain normative and purposive take on the experienced world.

10. Words of Silence, Stories of Suspension

This understanding that the *suspension* of our commitments and of our particular normative orientations is only a *heightening* of our awareness of the necessity of commitments, norms, and investments *in general* provides another way of looking at the final shot of *Le mépris*, one which can allow for a different way of defining the distinct capacities of a cinematic modernism from that which we have seen articulated by Deleuze. After Paul says goodbye to Lang and walks offscreen to the right, on his way back to Rome, Raoul Coutard's camera tracks in to show the filming of the travelling shot Lang has been preparing, of Odysseus looking towards his homeland, before panning across to the left, away from Lang, his camera operators, and his actor, coming to rest on an image of the blue sea (at Capri, posing in Lang's film as Homer's Ithaca) against a blue sky. The image, as Bersani and Dutoit highlight, has passed away from both the fictional world of Paul and Camille and from the fiction within the fiction, to rest on this image, which does not show anyone's homeland, or anyone looking at their homeland, but only an expanse that eclipses all particular motivations and purposes, that can inspire only contemplation in its dwarfing of our living projects. Yet it should be obvious that the power of this subtraction of our attention from the world(s) of the film(s) is directly tied to the fact that we hold those worlds and those stories in negative attention in being removed from them: it is only because we have known these stories and

known them in their insufficiency and their failure that we experience this closing image *as* the suspension of stories and of motivations.

This is further emphasised by the film's final reminder that no image is free from motivation or construction, with its final words, which are spoken over this image of the sea – Godard, playing Lang's assistant, calls out (in French), "Silence!", and his instruction is repeated by another member of the set in Italian: "Silenzio." That we have to tell ourselves and others to be silent, that each language has its own word for silence, and that the instruction to be silent has to be communicated in a distinct linguistic form to distinct listeners, all of whom know silence only in its negative relation to the sounds they recognise and the language they speak and hear, and know themselves to be in a space of silence only because they have a word for it, a word whose determination of silence renders silence qualitatively available only to those who can speak or hear or read – all of this reminds us that there is no pure retreat from investment in the world, no retreat from the interpretive and expressive realm of language into the supposed simplicity and communion of silence, for silence is only registered as such through a self-conscious and linguistic suspension of language which holds language in negative attention in the very granting of power to silence.

What distinguishes Godard's modernism – from, for one, Homer's *Odyssey* – is that it asks us to hold at once story and its eclipse, the image of Odysseus looking at his homeland and the storyless image of the sea. The negative capability that a shot such as this one solicits in a viewer – as an instance of the modernist pedagogy identified earlier in this dissertation in Flaubert – is a recognition of both the provisionality and the necessity of stories, of the fact that even one's critical reflection upon stories is the telling of a story, and participates in a world in which stories are disseminated and translated. If to Homer the sea represented only

possibility, adventure, and eventual homecoming, to Godard, such possibility is intimately bound up with impossibility: our projects will not master the sea, conquer the world, or assure us of our place in this world when we return from war. But such recognition does not lead us to transcend stories as an investment of ourselves in the world and its possibilities, so as to occupy a space of detached, contemplative, unmotivated "belief" in the world "as it is," or a merging of ourselves with the light of the world, such that there would be no distinction between ourselves and what we behold. Removal from the stories through which the world and one's own life have been cohered enables only a reflection upon the necessity of stories and motivations for experience as such, and this removal thus enables a renewal of the *question* of what one's own projects, commitments, and stories are.

This inescapability of motivation equally puts in question the idea – asserted by Parain, and affirmed by Nana – that language is inherently insufficient and goes in search of an eternity that would obliterate it. In a discussion of language in the *Cogito* chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty criticises Parain's *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* on this point: "Must it be concluded… that language, born and developed in obscurity, and yet capable of moments of clarity, is nothing but the other side of an infinite Thought, and this Thought's message as confided to us?"[65] Merleau-Ponty argues, by contrast, that "[t]he phenomenon of language – in the double sense of an originary fact and as a wonder – is not explained, but rather suppressed if we double it with a transcendent thought, since it consists in the fact that an act of thought, for having been expressed, has from then on the power of outliving itself."[66] The 'infinite' of thought, the experience of thought as something certain, able to survive its particular instances to become universal, is,

[65] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 412. This sentence is followed by a citation of Parain's book.
[66] Ibid.

on Merleau-Ponty's account, the product of spoken, human language itself, and is a power established and sustained only through the sociality of speech and living speakers. The universal in this sense is entirely temporal and entirely social and linguistic: it is through language that an experience of universality is possible, as the objective form of a community of thought that survives temporally, each time words deposited from the history of thought are taken up again in new directions. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "[t]hat which is called the 'non-temporal' within thought is that which, for having thus taken up the past and engaged the future, is presumptively of all times, and is thus anything but transcendent to time."[67] Whereas Parain in *Vivre sa vie* – in a way that aligns with his earlier book, which Merleau-Ponty criticised in these terms in 1945 – affirms Nana's belief that transcending language is our ideal and is what would save us from the ambiguity and uncertainty of sociality and self-consciousness, here Merleau-Ponty argues that it is only through the sociality and intersubjectivity of language that a sense of the universal, of a truth that exceeds the immediate presence of experience and that can link this experience to something greater than itself, is established: the universal is not beyond language, but exists in and through language.

As discussed above, the scene with Parain is followed by a final chapter which first fulfils Nana's desire for silence, through a silent film sequence that shows her happily in love, before tainting this happiness with the recounting of "The Oval Portrait," and finally shifting to the abrupt scene of Nana's shooting and death. By emphasising the reciprocity between these concluding scenes – where the happiness of silence and ideal love is shown to lead ineluctably to its opposite, to the loss of all connection in the most arbitrary and brutal of deaths – the film makes it difficult to accept at face value either Parain or Nana's affirmations of the non-linguistic as the ideal. Rather, it is the very desire for this illusory form of

[67] Ibid., 413.

transcendence that is shown to be Nana's error – an 'error' which, more fundamentally, is a response to a social world which provides her with no livable identity – and it is our awareness of the fragility of the ideal world of the silent sequence that establishes the formal logic which leads from it into the death scene. Through this sequence of scenes, Nana's desire to be recognised for her uniqueness and specialness, expressed in her words to Paul and to Raoul, and reaffirmed in the ideal love she expresses for the unnamed young man, is shown to lead unavoidably to the depersonalisation found in death. The sequence does not establish a *priority* of depersonalisation over selfhood, as Silverman and Farocki suggest, but rather an antinomic *reciprocity* between specialness and self-dissolution as obliterations of the sociality and intersubjectivity proper to *living one's life*, as a temporal activity of self-determination from which one is never unburdened as long as one is alive.

These points further provoke a rethinking of the meaning of "Je est un(e) autre," as it appears both in *Vivre sa vie* and in Sartre's text (and, somewhat more obscurely, in Deleuze's). Rimbaud's phrase indicates that the "I" can never simply or definitively be coincided with by thought or language. While Sartre draws from this a fundamental priority of impersonal consciousness over the personality of the "I," as though there were *first* an impersonal consciousness, and *then* an "I" which falsely claims identity with this primary consciousness (an order of priority which Deleuze's evocation of this same Rimbaud text in his radical separation between the *voyant* and the *actant*, the consciousness that sees and the "I" who acts, appears to accord with[68]), it is not clear that Rimbaud's phrase has to be understood to hold this consequence. What Rimbaud shows, rather, is that there is always some distance or non-identity between the one who thinks and the one who is named as "I" in

[68] As mentioned in the above Introduction, Deleuze acknowledges his philosophical debt to Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* with its emphasis on the impersonality of the transcendental field in several places, notably *Logic of Sense*, 112; and his last essay, "Immanence: A Life."

this thought, since one makes oneself an object in naming oneself. This means that there is no safety or certainty of dwelling in the "I" as if it were a primordial home eternally fixed in place (this would be something like Nana's desire to be recognized as special, as distinctly *someone* and immediately recognizable for this distinctiveness), but it does not mean that the "I" is a secondary or illusory "habit" (as Deleuze elsewhere claims[69]), or that there could ever be a purely impersonal thought (suggested by Parain's idea that the desire of language as such is to attain the silent self-sufficiency of God). To have a conscious experience and to have a take on this experience in thought is *already* to have an experience of self, inasmuch as one can only hold two temporal moments or two elements of one's experience together by designating oneself as the subject of that experience. That "I is another" can be understood to show that this experience of self is always and inextricably also a distanciation from self, inasmuch as the ability to say "I" entails the ability to put this "I" in question, to question what I take for granted about my experience and myself, since these never coincide with thought in the act of thinking. Both selfhood and the questioning of selfhood come at once with the capacity to relate consciously to one's experience.

11. The Gift of the Self: Sociality and Subjectivity

The film's other central citation – "Il faut se prêter aux autres, et se donner à soi-même" – can also be returned to in this context. It it tempting to read this phrase of Montaigne's as an affirmation of the self as a prior unity held back from the commerce and mixity of social relations, a true and primary self that is kept from others. Yet Montaigne does not say to *keep* oneself *for* oneself, but to *give* oneself *to* oneself: self-relation is itself understood socially, as

[69] Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (Columbia University Press, 1991), x.

something one only learns through social relations with others. Self-relation entails not dwelling in a primary, pre-social ipseity, but rather establishing a relationship to oneself *through* one's relations with others, allowing oneself a negative space of reflection upon those relations. When I give myself to myself, I allow myself the space to recognise that none of the relations I have taken up with others and none of the identities through which I have defined myself are fixed in place, that I can always take up a negative and critical relationship to them through the reflection I engage in.

Merleau-Ponty, in his essay "Reading Montaigne," cites this same phrase, suggesting that with it, Montaigne shows the capacity of subjects to "withdraw and carve a corner of indifference for ourselves from which we look upon our actions and our life as unimportant 'roles'."[70] Yet as he goes on to point out, this distance and this indifference are never straightforwardly achieved, and they are certainly not the functions of a primary, presocial identity of the conscious "I." Notably, in reflecting on Montaigne's account of the dynamic of selfhood, Merleau-Ponty here brings in the language of possession, recalling the restlessness and reciprocity of recognition which this chapter has shown to entail an interruption of strictly possessive models of selfhood:

> Montaigne does not know that resting place, that self-possession, which Cartesian understanding is to be. The world is not for him a system of objects the idea of which he has in his possession; the self is not for him the purity of an intellectual consciousness. … We are equally incapable of dwelling in ourselves and in things, and are referred from them to ourselves and from ourselves to them.[71]

Even if in moments of withdrawal we can regard the identities we have taken on in life as "unimportant 'roles'" (as Nana does when she declares, "Je est une autre"), the critical distance we take up towards our lives ultimately only shows us that we have nothing other

[70] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 203.
[71] Ibid., 199.

than these lives and the roles we take up within them, such that our obligation and our freedom is to commit ourselves in the knowledge that no particular role and no particular set of actions is guaranteed of success:

> The critique of passions does not deprive them of their value if it is carried to the point of showing that we are never in possession of ourselves and that passion is ourselves. At this moment, reasons for doubting become reasons for believing. The only effect of our whole critique is to make our passions and opinions more precious by making us see that they are our only recourse.[72]

Our very capacity to put all particular commitments, relationships, and identities in question only reconfirms that we are inextricably tied to a world involving others, and that even our criticism and our doubt are directed towards this shared world:

> In fact, Montaigne did not simply doubt. Doubting is an action; thus doubt cannot demolish our action, our doing, which is in the right against it. The same author who wanted to live according to himself felt passionately that we are among other things what we are for others, and that their opinion reaches us at the core of our being.[73]

Godard's use of Montaigne's phrase as an epigraph to *Vivre sa vie* obviously evokes Nana's relations with men and her difficult effort to live a life of her own. If the idea of a primary self prior to relations with others is misplaced as a reading of Montaigne's phrase and of Godard's film's use of it, the phrase renders equally unsatisfactory efforts to read the film as privileging the loss of self *in opposition to* identity, as we find in Silverman and Farocki's dialogue, and in much other Godard criticism, such as the work of Bersani and Dutoit discussed above. The self-relation Nana maintains over and above her particular relations with others is not a primary identity untouched by others or by the social identities she takes on in the world, but is a self-conscious capacity to take up a negative relationship *to* any of these particular identities and relations, a capacity to pose to herself the question of who she is and how she will live. As such, and as Montaigne's phrase indicates, self-relation

[72] Ibid., 206.
[73] Ibid., 207.

and relations with others are inextricably linked, and the idea of privileging one over or in opposition to the other is incoherent; it is through living in the world and bearing a negative, self-conscious relationship to one's own life and to the identities one takes on that one establishes a sense of oneself. What causes anguish and leads Nana to the disaffection of renouncing all the markers of identity she holds, and desiring in sex work an identity that would somehow be a removal from identity and desire, is that this self-relation is both inescapable and perpetually unfinished: one cannot *not* have a take on one's life and on what one does, and one cannot not act in light of this self-consciousness. Both non-identity and the guaranteed identity of specialness appear to offer a refuge from this unceasing and temporally projected self-relation, yet these are both shown by the film to be fantasies that undermine life itself. It is not by accident that Nana does not achieve the ideal of non-identity in sex work, that her desire gets in the way of Raoul's stoic demand that she accept all men with equal indifference; this demand cannot fail to fail, since Nana learns that she is always present to her own experience and is always making choices in how she takes it up, and in staging this conflict the film shows the parallel failures of the fantasy of non-identity and the fantasy of pure identity.

Far from treating sex work as a metaphor for the loss of identity, in *Vivre sa vie* Godard presents Nana's experience as one in which her initial effort to dissolve her own desire into the desire of others in order to alleviate her own anxiety culminates only in a deeper awareness of her own self-presence, even in the act of disidentification. In placing at the centre of his film this character and her struggle between asserting and dissolving every identity through which she is constituted, and presenting her character through the mediation of an assortment of texts – from the story of the chicken to Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* and the letter she writes to a prospective Madam, to name a few – and through the

deconstructed narrative of its episodic structure, Godard enacts what Deleuze identifies as a paradigmatically modernist unmaking of the narrative order of the "organic regime" through which the world may once have been brought to coherence as the object of purposive and future-oriented projects. But such interruption of narrative and of the primary coherence of character, such problematisation of the capacity of character to cohere the world and the self through action, does not signal the dissolution of subjective investment and purposive projects through sheer affirmation of the world "as it is," as Deleuze proposes. Rather, it is only through this interruption of the 'natural' or 'organic' status of the narratives human beings live by that subjects can know themselves *as* the subjects of narratives; it is only once one's projects are denaturalised and demythified, revealed in their contingency and fragility, that one can take up a conscious relationship to them, re-evaluating them in light of the absence of any organic meaning donated to them by the world itself. In the unmaking of genre and character carried out by so many of Godard's films of his early period, the identities that people take on become stifling, unconvincing, and boring both to themselves and to the filmmaker, and this problem, which has largely comic consequences in a film like *À bout de souffle*, finds its tragic expression in *Vivre sa vie*. Some have interpreted Nana's dissatisfaction with the identities she holds in the world to offer self-dissolution as a positive answer to the situation the film presents, with sex work standing as a metaphor for this process. Yet what the film shows is the exact opposite: it shows that in the very experience of dissatisfaction with the social roles through which she has been determined, and in her desire to be unburdened from the responsibilities of language and self-consciousness, Nana learns only that she cannot live except through the taking on of social roles of which she is always conscious, and which always admit of the possibility of dissatisfaction and rejection.[74] One

[74] Even in sex work she can experience rejection, as we see in Tableau 9 when a prospective client loses interest in her and chooses someone else.

can escape neither social roles nor one's own self-conscious and critical perspective upon them. The question of one's political freedom to reject the social roles one doesn't want can only follow upon an already operative freedom to take up this self-conscious self-relation, a freedom which seeks its own political concretisation.

This means that the end or goal of recognition is not the abandonment of all possession, as Beauvoir suggests – as though we could leave behind our particularity as individuals with definite attributes so as to be recognised in our general humanity – but rather the cultivation of a self-conscious relationship *to* our possessions and attributes as revisable in light of what we learn about them from others and from ourselves. Selfhood does not presume some primary identity separate from one's particular possessions and attributes, but is the ongoing and revisable product of an enduring capacity to relate to these possessions and attributes while engaged in a living activity that never ceases, posing the question of who one is through this reflection upon the possessions that constitute who one has been. *Vivre sa vie* offers the fullest expression of Godard's modernism, because it brings this negative and self-conscious capacity of subjects to bear on his recurring theme of the failings and dissatisfactions of character and narrative, showing that these failings do not produce an affirmation of dissolution and purposelessness, but instead pose the modernist question of how one is to live in light of the knowledge that there is no assuredly right way to live, that one is not the hero(ine) of a story whose centrality and specialness are guaranteed, but a person in a world which will always admit of other stories, other protagonists, and other framings.

Conclusion

Experience and Identity: Narrativity, Maturity, Vulnerability

> Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win.
>
> ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *STALKER*

> Experience is an exercise in vulnerability to how things actually are.
>
> ROBERT BRANDOM, *A Spirit of Trust*

> Enlightenment is the emergence of human beings from their self-imposed immaturity.
>
> IMMANUEL KANT, "An Answer to the Question, 'What is Enlightenment?'"

This dissertation has developed an argument about identity as constitutive, as something that is being worked out, questioned, and rearticulated, in all experience – even in the act of explicitly rejecting an identity. By identity, I mean a self-conception, an account of who one is which one puts at stake in what one does. The preceding chapters have engaged critically with a number of readers and theorists who valorise *flight from identity* as the essential form of freedom or emancipation, and who further associate the virtues of art and aesthetic experience with this flight from identity. In this Conclusion, I want to address more directly what I take to be a driving force of these and other critiques of identity, which is the idea that identity *reduces* experience to a homogeneous and conventionalised form, acknowledging this experience only insofar as it is legible in terms of a consciously held identity. The taking on of an identity, on this account, flattens a more primary, radically heterogeneous experience that is irreducible to such a conventionalised order, and emancipation in its various guises is thus to be understood in terms of some form of recuperation of such a primary, impersonal or pre-subjective experience, in a way which shatters the identities through which the world and the self have been organised. In what follows, I want to

consider some further philosophical expressions of the critique of identity, and to address the challenge they provide: what do these accounts of a pre-subjective or impersonal experience seek to acknowledge that is at risk of being lost in an approach which privileges identity? What needs to be rearticulated or revised in my own approach in order to answer to this challenge? Ultimately, the approach I mean to develop to these questions seeks to overcome the opposition between experience and identity, not by reducing the former to the latter, but by seeing them as dynamically co-constitutive: the constitutiveness of identity does not place the self (or the mind) outside lived, perceptual experience, reducing it to a sameness mastered by this self; for the ways in which our experience goes beyond what can be comprehended in terms of the identities we uphold is intrinsic to the ongoing working-out of identity. The modernist narrative art studied in this dissertation, I argue, renders palpable this co-constitutive relation of identity and experience, showing at once the dissatisfactions of the search for a static and assured identity, and the continual re-emergence of identity as a question even in the most extreme of limit-experiences, when identity appears to be renounced or transcended.

1. Identity and Worldview

In an article published in IAI News in May 2021, the philosopher and Nietzsche scholar Raymond Geuss argues that the search of individuals for an identity is ultimately the expression of a misguided desire for "a complete, all-encompassing account of The Truth, a worldview." To claim an identity, Geuss suggests, is to identify oneself with a distinct worldview, a distinct claim to have gained a position of truth, a true perspective on the world. Geuss gives the example of the Stoic Sage as philosophy's oldest model of the exemplary individual who "knew who he was": "He was the ideal man because he had the proper

worldview containing a Truth that was sufficiently substantial to serve as a guide for human life, and because he had trained himself to react, in feeling, sentiment and conduct in a way that was appropriate [to] that worldview and which gave him his particular identity."[302] An identity in this sense (which Geuss also locates in the worldviews of Christianity and Communism) establishes a harmonious unity between what a person does and their understanding of themselves *as* the doer of their deeds. The Sage acts in ways that accord with the worldview that he has attained, his every act reconfirming both his sense of who he is and his belief that the view of the world he upholds is the correct one. On this model of identity, to live well is to consistently adhere to the worldview that coheres one's sense of oneself: a 'good Catholic' or a 'good Communist' is one who has so successfully identified with their worldview that it has become a second nature, so effortlessly do one's actions abide by it. Yet this is a nature of a self-conscious kind, one that the individual is as much master of as mastered by: when I act in accordance with my worldview, in the name of this identity I have given myself, I know and can rationally affirm the reasons for which I act in this way rather than another. In this ideal form of identity, the tension between what one does and the person one takes oneself to be is resolved into a perfect circle of rational self-knowledge.

The figure of the circle here is a significant one: from one perspective (which would include Geuss's own), the beauty and unity of the circle of action and identity are precisely the beauty and unity of an *enclosure*, a self-fulfilling and self-justifying repetitive loop.[303] If the goal of life is to attain a 'fixed' identity of the kind Geuss sees in the Stoic, Christian, and

[302] Raymond Geuss, "You Don't Need An Identity," *IAI News*, Issue 96, 19th May 2021 (https://iai.tv/articles/you-dont-need-an-identity-auid-1811)
[303] Louis Althusser's essay, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," offers a brilliant critical engagement with the philosophical figure of the circle, which for Althusser is associated above all with the philosophy of Hegel. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 229-242.

Communist attitudes, in which every action is in harmony with the identity and worldview that one has given oneself, this can quickly come to be seen as a trap, a room with no window on the outside, because it believes itself to contain every outside and be the perspective of the true or the whole. The most obvious problem with such claims to have attained the true perspective through one's identity, as Geuss points out, is that there are other people with *other* identities who are just as confident that theirs is the true one. What may distinguish modernity from both the Stoic and the Christian worlds on this point is that modernity offers a plethora of possible identities, a parade of images of who you can be. Geuss considers how this feature of the experience of modernity is critically presented in Robert Musil's novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, whose eponymous hero, Ulrich, faced with such a litany of potential identities and worldviews, "cannot see any of these forms of engagement as anything more than possible ways of living, chosen from among an almost unsurveyable group of others to which one could equally well devote oneself."[304] And if no particular identity is sure of being the right one – since there are any number of others that may from a detached perspective be equally compelling or meaningful – how would the taking on of an identity not be a trap, an enclosure in a perfect circle of self-repetition, the perspective of a madman muttering to himself while thinking that he is an omniscient God? If we have to take on an identity and worldview from a position of uncertainty and choice between multiple options, how could any such identity ever provide the assurance and self-knowing rationality that we believe we have attained once we have taken it on? To assume an identity, Geuss's interrogation suggests, is to tell oneself a lie, the lie that one is identical to oneself and that there is no distance between the named identity one holds in the world and the consciousness one has of oneself. The perfect circle has to be *made*, and this act of making is not a circle but

[304] Geuss, "You Don't Need An Identity."

an incision, a line cutting across the openness of space and time, a decision that is neither given in advance as a moment within a circular process nor assured of success.[305]

The link between identity and worldview that Geuss proposes is a crucial one, for it allows us to recognise that the assertion of an identity is never simply about *oneself*, but is always and in the same moment an assertion about *the world*. To say "I am a Christian" or "I am an artist" is to cohere the world in a Christian or an artistic way, to have things show up as meaningful or fade into the background as irrelevant according to how they are available to being made sense of from within this affirmed worldview.

2. Nietzsche, Pre-Conceptual Experience, and the *Ressentiment* of the Self

Geuss's argument here has an important precursor in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Nietzsche argues that the concepts through which human thought organises the objects of our sensory experience serve to collapse the irreducible heterogeneity of this experience into an assortment of self-referential "metaphors" that we believe constitute "truth." The drive to truth, Nietzsche suggests, originates in the social necessity of coexisting with others: "a uniformly valid and binding

[305] Again, the theorist who is most *incisive* on this point of the critique of circularity is Althusser, who again has (a version of) Hegel above all in mind when making these criticisms. While these images are used most explicitly in the essay on Cremonini, all of Althusser's fundamental theoretical interventions have to do with replacing a logic of the circle with a logic of sharp lines that make incisions and cut across the heterogenous space of the social whole. The reason why, for Althusser, "there is no Hegelian politics," is because politics is a matter of intervention and decision (the act that sees a possibility in the specific present "conjuncture" – a key Althusserian concept which asserts that any present is a point of intersection of heterogenous lines rather than the holistic unity of a circle). See Althusser, "The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time," in Althusser et al., *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, 237-267; and Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*, 87-128. In the book from which many of the ideas of this short article are drawn, *Who Needs a World View?*, Geuss cites Althusser's famous theory of subjectivity as 'interpellation' as an incisive account of the 'calling' that is the taking on of an identity (Geuss, 1) – following my line of interpretation here, we can say that the theory of interpellation is a theory of the *cut* that *institutes* the (illusory) circle of the self, which is thus revealed to lack the self-sufficiency and self-knowing unity that it presumes. Althusser's perspective does, however, remain within the bounds of a renunciation of self-relation or identity as secondary to a supposedly more primary reality, which I engage with critically here.

designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth." A statement is true if it corresponds to the collectively accepted application of concepts, while a statement is considered a lie if it fails to apply these socially given concepts in the consistent and conventional way; such as when a man "says, for example, 'I am rich,' when the proper designation for his condition would be 'poor'."[306] Truth, Nietzsche proposes, is a set of conventions, and the truthful person is one who successfully adheres to these conventions, and who is appreciated for their truthfulness because they reassure the community of the validity of its accepted conventions. "It is this way with all of us concerning language," Nietzsche writes: "we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities."[307] The connection Geuss draws between *identities* and *worldviews* makes a similar point about arbitrariness: when we insist that we have attained a true worldview, we are merely consistently applying the conventional designations for things that reconfirm the validity of this worldview. Even in the case of identities that are not, like those of Christian or Communist, avowedly ideological, the point applies: to take on an identity *as anyone*, Geuss's analysis suggests, is to allow things in the world to show up only inasmuch as they adhere to and reconfirm this identity.

Nietzsche himself draws the connection between language's demand for adherence to 'truth,' as a set of metaphors and conventions, and the very category of the human individual or subject, in a crucial passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

> Just as the common people distinguish lightning from the flash of light and take the latter as *doing*, as the effect of a subject which is called lightning, just so popular morality distinguishes strength from expressions of strength, as if behind the strong individual there were an indifferent substratum which

[306] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, 115.
[307] Ibid., 116.

> was at *liberty* to express or not to express strength. But no such substratum exists; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything.[308]

It is "the seduction of language" that enables this distinction between doer and deed, which has no grounding in reality.[309] Ultimately, for Nietzsche, the very establishment of this distinction is a product of the *ressentiment* of the weak towards the strong: whereas it is natural for the strong to use strength, and for the weak to lack all force, the distinction between doer and deed, or subject and action, is introduced by those who resent the strong for the strength that they, the weak, lack. These weak individuals thus proclaim that the strong *could*, if they wished, refrain from using force to dominate them, such that their wilful use of such force thus marks them as *evil*.

Essential to Nietzsche's narrative, in the *Genealogy*, of the world-historic defeat of "nobility" by a "slave revolt" in morality, is that the noble values of an immemorial past held no notion of a subject or self, and the noble form of morality was entirely, innocently, and unself-consciously relative to the nobles' own perspective and self-interest. What was good was the nobles themselves and what belonged to them, while what was bad was whatever was 'below' them – "everything low, low-minded, common, and plebeian."[310] This lost innocence of a noble humanity which affirms its own boundedness to life is one which has not yet fallen into the paroxysms of the search for identity: the nobles simply assert their natural force and dominance because these are proper to their being, without needing to reflect on who they are or to evaluate their own actions according to a moral order other than one which simply expresses their life and their will. When Nietzsche speaks of the nobles' 'innocence,' to be clear, he does not mean that they view the world in some unbiased or

[308] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford, 1996), 29 (Essay 1, Paragraph 13).
[309] Ibid., 30.
[310] Ibid., 12 (Essay 1, Paragraph 2).

objective way; Nietzsche is clear that there is no such unbiased or objective view of the world for any being (nor does he think there would be anything good about such a way of viewing the world). Rather, the nobles are innocent because they are unself-conscious *about* their immediately self-interested view of things; they assert their will directly, joyfully, as an expression of their (animal) life.

While the nobles do have a (relative, non-universal) perspective, they do not have a *worldview* in the sense Geuss gives to this term. This is because to hold a worldview, on this account, requires the self-conscious affirmation of *this* worldview *rather than* some other worldview(s) that one might hold, or that are held by others. The pride taken in feeling that one has attained a (or the) *true* worldview depends on the recognition that this attainment of truth is not natural or given to everyone, that one has to be among the chosen or elect to reach this truth; and this pride is tied to an acknowledgement that there are other, false worldviews, held by less virtuous and less wise people. Nietzsche's proposition is that the ancient peoples he calls nobles had no such pride, and no such self-conscious worldview, because of their *natural* strength and superiority over the weak, or slaves. The nobles were *innocent* in their strength and dominance, wishing no ill-will towards the slaves, who were simply their natural inferiors, and as such warranted no ill-feeling.[311] This innocence of the nobles in their natural superiority is defined by a lack of self-consciousness about their own way of seeing and acting, which they experience simply as naturally right and just – hence Nietzsche's etymological argument that the earliest words for goodness derived from words for nobility. In the nobles' experience, there are not on the one hand good things and on the other hand the people who do them, who attain or demonstrate the quality of goodness by virtue of acting well; there are simply the acts of nobles, which are good because they are the acts of nobles,

[311] Ibid., 29.

and the acts of slaves, which are bad because they are the acts of slaves. 'Good' and 'bad,' in this original language, are essentially descriptive rather than prescriptive terms, innocent of both malice and pride. It is only when the weak *react* against this natural state of domination that the primary, unself-conscious innocence of a human animal content in its own life is dispelled, replaced by a creature that is puffed up with pride at the feeling that it has attained an objectively true worldview.

The modern understanding of identity, Nietzsche's story leads us to conclude, is born as part of this slave revolt in morality: only now, in the resentful and rebellious attitude, do human beings consciously give themselves definition, based on an inner feeling rather than a 'natural' expression of their animal will. They do so in reaction against a state of affairs that they do not like, which they arm themselves against by declaring it unfair and unjust, declaring that this state of affairs is really all about oppressing *them*, the weak. While we may recoil at the aristocratism of Nietzsche's historical argument, his philosophical challenge is a great one: for it suggests that to enter the space of identity, to pose the question of who one is, and to offer a response to this question, is itself an act of *ressentiment*, a denial of life and nature which reacts against the world by puffing itself up with pride at its own importance and virtue. The assertion of identity, Nietzsche's powerful argument leads us to conclude, is a monstrous effort at declaring one's own consistency and coherence, one's resilience as oneself in the face of a hostile and wicked world which one rejects, arrogantly placing oneself above this world in one's self-proclaimed 'identity'. Nietzsche's thinking on this question, and its contemporary rearticulation by Geuss, is thus of considerable interest and significance for the project elaborated in this dissertation.

An answer that has been given throughout this dissertation to challenges posed to the category of identity (often by thinkers influenced by Nietzsche) is that, in order to think the dissolution or failure of identity, thought has to think the identity of the one who thinks this dissolution or failure itself. The critique of identity, I have argued, does not allow us to have done with identity, but only increases its grip, by posing the question of how we are to go on in light of this critique that *we* have performed. When we consider the failure of a person to be who they claim to be, or the tensions that any claim to identity falls into as soon as it is made – given that to identify oneself is to take distance from oneself and thus to already in its utterance no longer be simply identical with the identified 'I' – we must also, I have argued, consider our own capacity to perform this critical reflection upon identity, and our capacity to know ourselves to be engaged in this critique. The 'I' that knows it cannot essentially or finally know itself is profoundly distinct from an 'I' that upholds an attitude of mastery and self-certainty, but it is nonetheless also an 'I'.

This response remains an important part of the picture I want to develop in this Conclusion; but it needs to be thought through further in consideration of what Nietzsche and Geuss consider the distinct power and liberation of an experience unbounded by identity. That taking on an identity and a worldview seems unavoidable is something Geuss and Nietzsche may agree with their critics about, but on their account, this is a fault of the way of life we have been condemned to. The renewal of an affirmative and creative mode of life, happy in its indifference to truth and to its own identity, freely embracing the novelty of what Nietzsche calls the "aesthetic relation" it takes up to a world it encounters through "a suggestive transference" rather than through any form of knowledge or mastery – such an attitude would then remain justified as a critique of the category of identity.[312] If it is

[312] Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," 119.

language that condemns us to speaking of selves and of worldviews whether we like it or not, then so much the worse for language, Nietzsche is leading us to conclude. The fact that he can only express this very claim in language does not undermine the force of the claim, but simply reminds us of the contradictory state we occupy when we operate in the realm of language and knowledge-claims, which constantly refer back to an identity and a worldview – the 'I' who speaks, who sees, who knows, who is present to their own knowledge – in order to justify themselves. A genuine response to Nietzsche requires doing justice to the creativity and the affirmation of life that he thinks are lost to a world of self-conscious identities, by giving an account of how my claim of the constitutiveness of identity can differently acknowledge and comprehend this creativity and this affirmation.

The power of escaping the fixity of a familiar identity, of transcending the confines of who one can be and how one can live by entering a space of openness and experimentation, which Nietzsche and Geuss evoke, cannot be denied. As Nietzsche indicates with his evocation of an "aesthetic relation" between subjects and the physical world, aesthetic experience offers a particularly rich domain for expressing this feeling. Flaubert provides a compelling account of this power of disidentification that he experiences in the activity of writing, in a letter to Louise Colet: "N'importe, bien ou mal, c'est une délicieuse chose que d'écrire, que de ne plus être *soi*, mais de circuler dans toute la création dont on parle."[313] The creative act as such may in some important sense be tied to this transcendence or refusal of the sameness of an established identity, allowing an overflowing of experience and possibility beyond the articulated purposes of an 'I'.

[313] Flaubert, *Correspondance : Deuxième Série (1850–1854)*, 359.

As we have seen, this disidentifying capacity of art is crucial to Rancière's work, which I have engaged with critically at earlier points in this dissertation. The idea that I have insisted on in criticism of Rancière is that the refusal of an identity is comprehensible only as an expression, however inchoate, of a desire for another way of articulating one's identity, a more self-determining way of saying 'I' – or what we might also call another worldview. Without this, I have argued, both politics and art (fundamentally connected, for Rancière, by their shared power of disidentification) can be understood only as negative, interruptive moments of no lasting worldly effect: political acts can never take on institutional consequences, since to institute something is to give identities and names to the participating subjects, who relate recognitively to each other within this institutional space; and artistic acts can be understood only as interruptions of a representational order that perpetually reasserts itself in the world at large. While I believe these are real limitations to Rancière's thinking about these questions, in this Conclusion I want to push further in considering the idea, discoverable in both Nietzsche and Rancière, that the mediation of experience in terms of identity does violence to an *openness to life* proper to a primary or elevated mode of experience, trapping human beings in conventionalised modes of seeing and acting which deny our very existence as living beings immersed in experience. Nietzsche and Rancière's shared attention to aesthetic experience as one in which this openness to life is renewed poses further questions for this dissertation's approach to modernist forms of narrative art. If the form of life valorised by theorists including Nietzsche and Rancière is said to be beyond or beneath identity, does this also place it beyond or beneath narrative? If narrative involves organising the temporally extended experience of a life or a collective history into the story of an 'I,' a 'we,' a 'he,' a 'she,' or a 'they,' is the retrieval or renewal of a purported non-subjective experience equally the affirmation of a 'non-narrative experience'? Considering

these questions will, ultimately, lead me to return to the discussion of modernist experimentation with and meta-reflection upon narrative developed in the preceding chapters.

3. Selfhood, Narrativity, and the 'Episodic'

The question of the *narrativity* of the self has emerged as a topic of contemporary philosophical debate. Galen Strawson, in a bracing rebuke to much of the literature on this subject, titled simply "Against Narrativity," argues against the claim that conscious experience either necessarily does, or necessarily should, entail any form of narrativity, any story connecting one's present experience to a past that one recalls and a future that one projects as one's own. Strawson – unlike, on my reading, Nietzsche or Rancière – does not disagree with the principle that an 'I' is in some fundamental sense necessary to human consciousness, as "an inner mental entity or self." Accepting such an 'I,' Strawson defines it as "that which I now experience myself to be when I'm apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self."[314] The key word here is *now*: for Strawson, my immediately present feeling of myself as the subject of my experience in no way entails any form of temporal continuity, and the feeling of being myself in the present moment in no way entails constructing a narrative of myself as a temporally extended whole. Strawson's claim is not simply that we don't necessarily remember or understand our pasts and ourselves in an objectively correct way – something that thinkers who assert the narrativity of the self could happily agree with – but rather that our present sense of self entails no attitude of any kind towards our past and future. This is because, for Strawson, the "inner mental presence or self" is entirely discontinuous with the organic life of the individual in whom this self is located. To feel 'myself' in the present moment, on Strawson's account, does not require that

[314] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII 4 (December, 2004), 428-452: 429; 433.

I care about, or acknowledge as relevant to me, the past or future experience of myself "considered as a whole human being." I can be aware of this "whole human being" with a past, present, and future, I can even remember things from this being's past as things that 'I' did, without this having any stakes for determining how I conceive of myself or what I care about.

For Strawson, while there may be some people who think of themselves narratively, constructing their own life story and defining who they are and what matters to them in terms of this story connecting past, present, and future, there are many people who simply do not conceive of themselves in this way. Strawson calls the latter "Episodics": people who live episodically, with no particular sense of themselves as a continuous whole. An Episodic is someone who "has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future." This is so despite the fact that "one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity as a whole human being."[315] The episodic individual is simply unaffected by the questions of who they were in the past or who they will be in the future; while they are perfectly aware that they share a living continuity with their past and present as "a whole human being," the present "I" feels no closeness or connection to the past and future "I's", which are experienced as scarcely less foreign than another person in another body. For Strawson, the "Narrativity thesis" proposed by many thinkers, according to which human beings either necessarily *do*, or necessarily *should*, experience themselves narratively, defining the meaning of their own experience in terms of a story of their lives, is fundamentally mistaken, a mere extrapolation from the way *some* people experience themselves and their lives to a claim about what the experience of a self *necessarily* is.

[315] Ibid., 430.

With his notion of the 'episodic self,' Strawson seeks to find a middle ground between the "narrativity thesis" that all selves are narrative selves, and the position which rejects the category of the self altogether. Episodic selves, for Strawson, experience themselves in the form of an 'I,' but they do so non-narratively. But this attempt at a middle ground quickly undermines itself. For, as soon as we look at what Strawson calls an episode, it is obvious that it is comprehensible only in terms of narrative – to designate something an episode is to give it a narrative structure, with a beginning and an ending; while to designate *oneself* an 'episodic person' is to make a claim about oneself as a whole, a claim that is of an essentially narrative kind. Strawson evades the philosophical question of the self by conceiving of it only in psychological terms: he imagines that what he calls the "narrativity thesis" is the thesis that individuals consciously think (much or most of the time) about their lives as narratives, and thus he believes that if he can point to an individual who doesn't consciously conceive of themselves in this way, he has disproven the thesis. Strawson wants to retain the concept of the self while rejecting that of the self's narrativity, and the concept of the episodic is his means for doing so. But this is to miss the point of the claim that narrativity is essential to conscious experience, by setting up in opposition to narrativity what are actually just other narratives – 'episodic' ones. The very claim that one 'is' episodic is a claim about oneself as a whole person, or in other words, a narrative claim about oneself. If I find myself enjoying an activity I am currently performing, and say to myself, "I guess I'm not like those people who think about their lives in a narrative, because I just like to focus on the thing I'm doing in the present moment," this is a narrative claim I am making about myself, and about my present activity as meaningful in light of the whole person I am.

To be truly 'episodic' in the way Strawson wants, one could have no consciousness of oneself *as* this episodic person; one could have no self-consciousness at all, because as soon

as one makes a claim or raises a question about who 'I' am, one poses this claim or question in the form of a whole. If we take seriously what Strawson calls an episode, there is no comprehensible boundary between it and what he calls a narrative: if I am capable of caring about what I am doing from one moment to the next within a single 'episode,' then I am already a narrative self, recognising implicitly that this activity I am currently performing is meaningful to me in light of the conception I have of who I am and what I take to be worth doing.

The genuine philosophical "narrativity thesis" is not a psychological claim that people consciously spend their time thinking about their earliest past and furthest future; it is rather the more fundamental idea that one cannot *do* anything without having some minimal sense of who one is and in light of what values one is doing what one is doing. 'Who one is' is an intrinsically narrative question, regardless of whether one thinks in explicitly narrative terms, for any answer to this question (an 'answer' which may be largely implicit, but which is nonetheless at stake as soon as one acts) takes up an attitude to one's whole life, ruling out certain things from one's past as alien to one's present commitments, and drawing upon others as meaningful and relevant to how one now conceives of oneself and what one values (again, this can be, and very often is, largely implicit or unconscious, without this making it any less of a narrative self-understanding of oneself as a whole person). The only philosophically honest and consistent view to oppose the "narrativity thesis" is one which takes up arms against self-consciousness as such, and declares that the true or preferable form of experience is a fully immersed one, with no reflection upon itself, and no temporally extended conception of oneself at stake in anything one does. This is the view that Nietzsche, in his account of the nobility, appears to defend. Strawson's effort to have it both ways, to

both retain self-consciousness and refuse the narrativity of oneself as a whole, culminates in the incoherent concept of the episodic self.

4. The "Innocence of Experience" Thesis

The thesis that opposes the "narrativity thesis" is what I will call the "innocence of experience" thesis. According to this thesis, any narrative sense of self is a secondary imposition upon a primary form of experience that is 'innocent' in the sense that it absorbs the individual entirely, who bears no self-conscious relationship to this experience *as* their own. Since a self has to have temporal extension – has to understand themselves as continuous with who they were a moment ago and who they will be in a moment's time – simply to have the experience of naming themselves as the subject of their experience, any self-conception has a tacitly narrative form. To reject narrativity is thus to reject, or treat as derivative and secondary, self-conception and self-consciousness as such. This is to conceive of primary conscious experience as 'innocent' of self-consciousness, purely itself in its immersion in and receptivity to the experienced world. From this perspective, the imposition of a narrative upon one's experience – a narrative of which one is the 'protagonist' – is to falsify this primary experience by creating a personally meaningful order out of what are impersonal, immediate, unself-conscious experiences.

Versions of the innocence of experience thesis have been encountered throughout this dissertation, in my discussions of Sartre, Rancière, Deleuze, and Nietzsche. Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego*, discussed in Chapter Three, provides something like the *locus classicus* of the thesis. In this essay, Sartre, unlike Strawson, commits fully to the position that primary conscious experience holds no temporal extension and no self-consciousness.

While Strawson, as seen above, places emphasis upon the "now" of present consciousness, his effort to retain the primacy of the self-conscious 'I' while jettisoning the narrativity of the self as whole leads him to replace the radical punctuality and immediacy of the "now" with the vague notion of the episode, which is itself temporally extended and thus bears a narrative structure. Sartre avoids these contradictions by affirming the total lack of temporal extension of primary consciousness, drawing from this denial of temporal extension the only logical conclusion, namely that this primary consciousness has no conception of self and is not an 'I' – here Sartre radicalizes in his own way Husserl and Brentano's thesis of the intentionality of consciousness, its fundamental direction and orientation outside itself. Sartre describes consciousness as an "impersonal spontaneity" which "determines its existence at each instant, without our being able to conceive anything *before* it. Thus each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo.* Not a new *arrangement,* but a new existence."[316] As Sartre sees clearly, if consciousness is to be innocent of the selfhood that relates its experiences *to itself* (which entails articulating them in temporally extended, narrative form), it must have no history – not even in 'episodic' form – but must die and be reborn in each instant, while every articulation of a self who is the subject of one's experiences is a secondary formation of an 'I' that is fundamentally foreign to this primary consciousness, which imposes a narrative form upon experiences that are themselves wholly non-narrative and unrelated to any self.

The true tension and disagreement is thus between the thesis that the narrativity of self-consciousness is primary, and the 'innocence of experience' thesis. Sartre provides one of the most compelling presentations of the latter thesis, mounting an argument that every narrative – and thus every self that is posited as a subject of experience – is an essentially false imposition upon a radically immediate, impersonal, non-narrative, *meaningless*

[316] Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 98-9.

experience. What is additionally rich and compelling about Sartre's approach to this question is that he argues that, while non-primary and in some crucial sense illusory, narrativity and the 'I' are inevitable to any form of self-consciousness, and as such are unavoidable illusions for human beings. While in *Trancendence* Sartre develops this argument with respect to the 'I,' it is in his novel, *La nausée*, that he more explicitly develops it with regard to the question of narrative. Strawson himself refers to *La nausée*, agreeing with its premise that there is nothing desirable or virtuous about narrativity, while disagreeing with its premise that narrativity is nonetheless inevitable for human beings in their construction of meaning.

5. MacIntyre: Narrativity and Human Action

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his wide-ranging and influential work, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, also engages with *La nausée*'s howl of contempt at narrativity and what Sartre considers its falsification of a meaningless and impersonal experience. For MacIntyre, whose project is to reassert the value of an ancient and medieval virtue ethics in the face of the individualism and alienation of modern social life and modern moral theory, the argument about narrative presented in *La nausée* exemplifies the modern attitude. MacIntyre here outlines the strong form of the 'narrativity thesis,' responding not merely to pseudo-objections like those of Strawson, but to the more fundamental objections of Sartre (or, we might add in a different register, Nietzsche, or Rancière). In presenting some key components of MacIntyre's argument here, I mean to outline a further response to the 'innocence of experience' thesis that has been an object of critical engagement in different forms throughout this dissertation, by here emphasizing the question of narrative explicitly. In so doing, I wish to draw out some conclusions about the narrativity of identity and self-

conception as such, deepening the arguments about how modernist forms of narrative art engage the question of identity developed in the preceding chapters.

For MacIntyre, the claim that there is something illegitimate or secondary about narrative accounts of behaviour and experience amounts to a profoundly impoverished understanding of human action. Narrativity is not something *added* to experience and behaviour from the outside, either retrospectively or reflectively by the same individual, or through the external observation of another person; rather, narrativity is *internal* to human behaviour on its own terms. Any behaviour is the expression of intentions (whether these intentions are fully conscious or explicit is another matter), and these intentions, MacIntyre adds, are comprehensible only in light of "the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others."[317] When we act, we act in relation to an intersubjective and historically constituted setting, and articulate some minimal intentional narrative that expresses our relationship to this setting. "There is no such thing as 'behaviour,' to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings," MacIntyre writes.[318] Any behaviour "becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative."[319] While this intellectual process of making behaviour intelligible may occur at a remove from the immediate action itself, such *explicitation* of narrative meaning should be understood as an expansion of a narrativity implicit to any behaviour itself. The only way that one can fail to place a behaviour in the narrative context of intentions and settings is when one lacks contextual knowledge, when one regards the behaviour of someone operating within settings whose meanings and conventions one is unfamiliar with. Considered in their living context, behaviours have an essentially narrative character. "Narrative history of a

[317] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 192.
[318] Ibid., 194.
[319] Ibid., 196.

certain kind," MacIntyre writes, "turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[320]

Narrativity is thus already at stake in human action as such, and any subsequent or more explicit narrative form we give when we interpret (our own or someone else's) actions is not the imposition of narrative upon a self-contained or inert action or set of events, but is a new elaboration of a narrativity operative in the actions themselves, adding its narrative to (or perhaps complicating or contesting) the narrative or narratives brought to the action by the actor themselves in the very carrying out of their action. Sartre's claim that we bring narrative meaning to a primary non-narrativity misunderstands the essential narrativity of action as the expression of intentions. MacIntyre's point is not that there is one correct narrative, such as that of an actor's explicit, conscious intentions, but simply that the narrativity of the interpretation of behaviour that Sartre bemoans is not qualitatively different from the narrativity proper to actions themselves.

The force of the critique of narrative – as made by Sartre among others – is that the narratives we use to order and make sense of the world and ourselves are far more provisional, contestable, and interpretative than is acknowledged by the solid form they are given in history books, in traditions and rituals, or in the words people use to describe each other and themselves. MacIntyre provides a way of acknowledging this point without positing narrative as a secondary falsification of a primary non-narrativity; and in so doing, he overcomes the static opposition between the meanings and senses that actions and events take on in the world and the actions and events themselves. If narrative is proper to action itself, if the performance of an action is the expression of intentions that one tacitly

[320] Ibid., 194.

understands in the narrative terms of drawing on a history by carrying out in the present an action oriented towards a projected future, and if the narrativity of such a single action is intertwined with the many shorter and longer-term narratives of this person's own life, and the larger histories of their community, their society, and the world, then no single narrative account of an action or sequence of actions will be final or exhaustive. MacIntyre's argument is not the 'postmodern' idea that, since all we have are more or less arbitrary interpretations and narratives, we may as well revel in this arbitrariness by building narratives upon narratives, playing up and emphasizing their arbitariness in acknowledgement that no narrative, including one's own, has any stake on the truth (an idea that draws on a strand of Nietzsche's thought). For this idea presumes that there is an inert, inaccessible, non-narrative primary reality that is subsequently given narrative form and thereby falsified by our attention to it. For MacIntyre, by contrast, narrative intentionality is operative all the way down, not only on the level of interpretation but equally on that of action itself. And while this narrativity is surely more available as an explicit question to human beings in the purposive forms they bring to their activity, it does not seem to stretch MacIntyre's insight too far to suggest that some narrative element is operative within all living organisms, insofar as the maintenance of their own life is at stake in their activity. If narrativity is proper to life, then it is not some interpretative or retrospective falsification that can be condemned – as both Nietzsche and Sartre frequently do – for its perversion of a meaningless and self-enclosed primary reality or natural way of living.

While Sartre and Nietzsche conceive of freedom and ethical life in opposition to the self-consciousness of narrativity, MacIntyre proposes that it is only by taking up and revising the narratives one inherits and has been defined by that one participates in ethical life and

expresses one's freedom.[321] "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?'," writes MacIntyre,

> if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.[322]

Sartre's scorn towards narrative gives voice to an experience of alienation from the socially embedded narratives within which individuals find themselves assigned scripted roles. But in opposing alienating forms of social life on these terms, he opposes sociality as such, offering withdrawal from social life and collective meanings as the only space of freedom. If we instead follow MacIntyre in seeing every behaviour and every attitude taken up to the world as itself narratively and intentionally determined, we re-establish a connection between the self-consciousness of individuals and the interpersonal, social and historical world.

It is *because* narratives precede us and predetermine (in an open way) how we will be seen and defined, and what narratives will be used to understand us and offered to us as forms through which we are expected to understand ourselves – it is only because of all this, only through our reception of the narratives that precede us and mark us before we have any say in the matter, that we can respond in turn, using our education in narrative to redetermine ourselves and the scripts within which we operate. "There is no way of *founding* my identity – or lack of it – on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self," MacIntyre writes.[323] My identity is established before I have any say in it – I am marked as the child of these people, as a citizen of this country, and by any number of further determinations and expectations that are brought to me by others (and if I lack a family or a country to claim me,

[321] A very similar argument – though not presented by means of the concept of narrative – is made by Merleau-Ponty in the passage on freedom cited in the above Introduction to this dissertation.
[322] *After Virtue*, 201.
[323] Ibid., 202.

my identity is defined as a form of non-identity by an other such as the state or international law). It is only because of these social determinations – and the possible alienation I can experience when these determinations conflict with my sense of myself – that I can work to redetermine who I am, to express outwardly my inner sense of what I value and what I can do, and thereby transform my identity – how I exist as a person in the world – though never in any complete or final way. As MacIntyre concludes, "rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it."[324]

6. Aesthetic Experience, Modernism, and the Suspension of Narratives

My concern in raising these debates here is to provide a new philosophical articulation of a set of concerns that have been presented throughout this dissertation: the interrelated questions of how modernist texts both problematize and redetermine narrative, and how in these same texts this redetermination of narrative is tied to a reopening of identity as a question. It may be observed that Flaubert, whom this dissertation has presented as an author who develops distinctly modernist responses to the questions of narrative and identity, holds some notable intellectual affinities with Sartre, that exemplary critic of each of these categories – Sartre's late, unfinished multi-volume study of Flaubert's early life and writings being only the most direct indication thereof. Jonathan Culler highlights a valuable example from a letter of Flaubert's youth which encapsulates his derisive attitude towards human intentionality, meaning, and narrative. Recalling the overarching thesis of Sartre's Flaubert study, concerning the young Gustave's withdrawal from and derision towards the whole field of human 'praxis,' Culler shows how this attitude enables the forms of perception and attention that will lead Flaubert to transform literature:

[324] Ibid., 205.

> When he writes in a letter, 'I can never shave without laughing, the process seems so ridiculous' (i, 262), he reveals the basic mechanism. Shaving is ridiculous in itself, but not as the response of an individual to annoying stubble on his chin. In that context it is a practical activity directed towards a certain goal; but destroy the human intentionality that gives it a meaning, consider it solely as object, and it becomes as ridiculous as a word repeated over and over until it becomes meaningless. This is what he calls 'the ridiculousness intrinsic to human life itself, which emerges in the simplest action or most ordinary gesture' (i, 262). The perception of intrinsic ridiculousness is based on a refusal to understand, a willingness to suspend the human project which gives the object unity and purpose. But since this brings about a renewal of perception, the role of 'l'idiot de la famille' promises well as artistic posture. He will write what he sees, from the vantage point of stupidity and alienation: magnifying, reducing, and generally arresting the world of praxis in a mode which will come to be called realistic but which is de-realizing in the sense that it does not show men actively making their destiny but allows that world of action and effective choice to collapse at the reader's touch.[325]

As Culler indicates, the 'ridiculousness' of the act of shaving results from the removal of the action's intelligibility as the expression of an intention or set of intentions, all of which are narratively defined. While MacIntyre's emphasis will be that there is something false about regarding an action by removing it from the intentions determining it, as there is no living perspective that is not itself intentional and narrative and that does not relate intentionally and narratively to what it encounters (and he would no doubt add that Flaubert himself is imposing an intention and a narrative, namely that of 'finding human action ridiculous by taking an external view of it'; just as Sartre's aim in his biographical study of the young Gustave is to embed Flaubert's anti-social rejection of 'praxis' in a psychoanalytic-Marxist narrative of family roles and the conventions and worldview of bourgeois society, perhaps in part so as to take revenge on his own Flaubertian, anti-narrative, non-Marxist earlier self of texts such as *La nausée*), Flaubert's remark and Culler's account of it remind us that this estranging power is always available, even if never absolutely successful or accomplished – the intentions one ascribes to one's own actions can never exhaustively account for the actions themselves, since there will always be other perspectives upon them,

[325] Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 9-10.

and so our actions are always under threat of being estranged from the meanings they hold for us, thus rendering them 'ridiculous'.

Most significantly, whereas MacIntyre assigns this estranged view only to "science" – namely the science of Skinnerian behaviourism, which removes intentionality from its account of behaviour, such that "there is nothing for it to be but a science of uninterpreted movement" – Culler here reminds us that such detachment from intentional understanding is also an aesthetic mode of experience.[326] The "absolute manner of seeing things" that Flaubert considers the definition of style involves this kind of slackening of intentionality and narrativity in the way we interact with the world. As Culler highlights, Flaubert's derisory attitude towards human meanings "brings about a renewal of perception," since it allows his writing to attend to the perceived world as it is given to experience, rather than accepting and reproducing the intentional, narrative meanings within which we conventionally place both the things we experience externally and our own actions. As we saw in Chapter One, for Rancière, Flaubert's absolute manner of seeing things refers to "the manner of seeing things when you are no longer a personal subject, pursuing individual aims. Consequently, it is the manner of seeing them when they are released from all the ties that make them useful or desirable objects. It is the manner of enjoying sensations as pure sensations, disconnected from the sensorium of ordinary experience."[327] We thus return to an overarching question orienting this Conclusion: do the notions of depersonalization, disidentification, or what I have here called the innocence of experience, which have been engaged with critically throughout this dissertation, not have a specific validity as an account of aesthetic experience?

[326] *After Virtue*, 194.
[327] Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had To Be Killed," 241.

We have just seen MacIntyre's answer to the idea of a breakdown of narrative and intentionality: the critique of narrative is itself another narrative, just as the refusal of identity is a way of living out one's identity. But this answer is too general to be entirely satisfying. The question is, *what happens* to narrativity and intentionality once they are defamiliarized and denaturalized – once the world has been aestheticized – as in the writing of Flaubert? My argument, here and in the earlier chapters, is that the *positive* forms of life – intersubjective and institutional forms of relating, and activity oriented towards ends that express our commitments – are enriched and redefined by the *negative* experiences of aesthetic suspension, of defamiliarization, denaturalization, and self-questioning. Rancière is not wrong to point to the power of aesthetic experience to loosen the everyday sense of the world as rationally ordered according to the purposes it serves; but what I argue is limited and problematic in his thinking is the suggestion that any total escape from intentionality and narrativity is either desirable or comprehensible. What we learn from Flaubert's writing is that the narratives we attach to others and to ourselves, and the meanings and purposes through which we justify our own actions or explain those of others, are intrinsically *insufficient*, never managing to fix the world or ourselves in place, never receiving a final 'yes' of acceptance from the world. In drawing our attention both to the constitutive narrativity of every way of seeing and to the insufficiency, partiality, and non-finality of every particular such narrative, a modernist art that unmakes and deconstructs narrative from within – of the kind we find in Flaubert, Beckett, and Godard – offers the possibility that we reinvest in the narratives and the purposive orientations we take up to the world with a heightened responsibility for our own role in articulating and sustaining them, and with a humility in acknowledging that the realization of these intentions will never provide a final satisfaction, that no single narrative we can recount stands as the end of all narratives, as the

narrative within which all others would be contained. The recognition of the constitutiveness of narrativity demands *both* the understanding that all narratives are insufficient *and* the responsibility of acknowledging our own agency in committing to certain narratives, narratives which are perpetually open to contestation and revision. Something similar was expressed in another idiom by Merleau-Ponty, when writing that "[t]he most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction": the effort to suspend our natural attitude of relating to the world through intentions and narratives reveals only the fullness of our living attachment to intentionality and narrativity, such that the ethical question of how to act in this world from which there is no living exit confronts us with the greatest force.

7. Innocence and Maturity

The approach I have developed so far suggests a different response to the question of *innocence*, raised most explicitly by Nietzsche, but at stake in certain ways in the texts by Sartre, Rancière, and Strawson discussed above. The argument that there is something falsifying and secondary about both narrativity and identity, I have suggested, depends upon the claim that experience as such is fundamentally innocent; that experience is first a pure receptivity of impressions unfiltered by meaning or conceptuality, and only subsequently overwritten in a conceptual form established through habituation and convention. Nietzsche's "Truth and Lies" essay remains a crucial expression of this view. As indicated above, Nietzsche's suggestion is *not* that our primary sensory impressions are 'truthful,' direct encounters with things-in-themselves; rather, he stresses that the empirical nature of our primary contact with the world means that we have no experience of things-in-themselves, but encounter the world from the mediated perspective of our own sensory capacities. This

primary experience is 'innocent,' however, on Nietzsche's account, inasmuch as it is pre-conceptual, and when we operate within this realm of pre-conceptual experience – as Nietzsche believes non-human animals do – we are immersed in life and in the direct, happy, innocent assertion of our own power. It is when we overwrite this primary sensory experience with concepts – most crucially, linguistic concepts – that we erode its innocence, by granting our once-innocent experiences a supposed universality. Suddenly, in the realm of conceptuality, our experiences are no longer this immediate presence through which we express our life; now, they are the experiences *of* these vaunted beings who take themselves as subjects, who make distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, good and evil, and affirm their own way of seeing and acting as the true one, as a perspective which has access to universal truth. Here and in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche replaces the familiar Enlightenment dualisms of rational / irrational, human / inhuman, science / mysticism, progress / tradition, with his own anti-modern dualisms affirming the virtues of unself-conscious animal life: health / sickness, strength / weakness, affirmation of life / reaction. Sickness, weakness, and reaction all define the man of reason, who turns away from life by claiming to know and to master it, pridefully imagining that his own intellect somehow transcends the physicality, finitude, and desire proper to animal life. The prideful attitude, associated as much with Enlightenment as with monotheistic religion, is a sickly and weak one because it seeks protection from life, rather than affirming life and all the risk and destruction it brings (Nietzsche's famous *amor fati*, or love of fate).

Another crucial dichotomy of Enlightenment thought which Nietzsche appears to overturn is that proposed by the famous opening sentence of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" essay: namely, that between maturity and immaturity. For Kant, Enlightenment and maturity involve a break away from 'tutelage' (*Unmündigkeit*), from an

unquestioning adherence to the authority of others and an unquestioning belief in the validity of whatever these authorities say or do. Nietzsche's critique of rationality and the truth-seeking attitude, however, suggests something disturbing in the project of maturity and Enlightenment itself – namely its inseparability from a kind of pride in one's own access to truth, one's own occupation of the space of reason. Nietzsche's point about the pride of the attitudes of rationality and knowledge raised in the "Truth and Lies" essay is closely linked to his account of the *ressentiment* of slave morality in the *Genealogy*: universal categories, be they of morality or truth, are always the categories of prideful subjects, conscious of themselves *as* the subjects of virtue or knowledge. Maturity, as a term corresponding to the achievement of a rational and self-determining outlook, would seem to be, from a Nietzschean perspective, both a prideful and a resentful attitude. It is prideful because it justifies itself through the claim that it occupies the space of reason, as the attitude of a subject capable of distinguishing good reasons on the basis of a truth which they have access to. And it is resentful because it is *reactive*, defining itself in relation to others rather than through an 'innocent' self-assertion: Kantian maturity involves combatting figures of authority by revealing the absence of a rational basis for their authority, and as such, in Nietzschean terms, it is defined from the beginning by reaction.

Since the attainment of maturity involves renouncing a prior state of immaturity, it would seem that it will always be defined in opposition to that which it rejects – and as such, will the claim of maturity not always require identifying *others* as immature, as objects of condescension or hatred, even if these others be one's past selves? On a Nietzschean view, as soon as we speak of reason, we assert it as a power we can claim to possess and that can be used to justify our actions, and 'maturity' becomes the name that subjects of reason give to themselves. The 'innocence' of an ancient nobility, lacking both this resentful consciousness

of how others see them and this prideful reaction to it through the assertion of their own reason, morality, and maturity, would then stand as Nietzsche's alternative to the whole logic of maturity. The innocent and the childlike avoid the pride and *ressentiment* of those who claim maturity, remaining innocent in their immersive experience, their joyous assertion of their own life, unburdened by the hateful pretension of the 'mature,' who feel themselves above the world thanks to their claim upon reason and truth.

I wish to defend Kant's notion of maturity against criticisms such as these; but doing so also requires rescuing it from its standard rendering as an assertion of the *independence* and *mastery* of rational individuals. Nietzsche's critique and overturning of the foundational dichotomies of Western thought – characterized most generally as the "reversal of Platonism" central to Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, but very much including a critique of some central premises of Enlightenment thought – expresses a critique of these attitudes of independence and mastery. This critique is laudable and vital. But, as I will seek to argue, the notion of maturity proposed by Kant should not be reduced to the attitudes of mastery and simple independence that characterise a certain tendency within Enlightenment and modern thought. Critique (including that performed by Nietzsche himself) is already beyond a space of 'innocence,' of sheer immersion in life and unself-conscious, happy self-assertion (even supposing that this ideal is coherent as the life of *anyone*), and as such it is already entangled with the question of maturity, the question of how to live in acknowledgement that one is not innocent and that one's world is not enchanted. Critique is intrinsically bound up with maturity, provided that the latter is understood in the right way: not as the attainment of mastery and independence, but as the acknowledgement of one's responsibility to act in ways that one can affirm, in light of ends one is committed to, precisely because one is not innocent, because one knows that the virtue or otherwise of how one lives depends on what

one does, and that there is no natural, unself-conscious way of life to retreat into. A modern engagement with Kant's text must involve not a rejection, but a redetermination of his idea of maturity.[328]

Merleau-Ponty's critical reflection on the 'classical' notion of *l'homme accompli*, or "fully-formed man," raised in the above Introduction, articulates such a redetermination of maturity. As discussed there, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'classical' attitude mistakes maturity for an independence and mastery that overlooks the world from a safe distance; it conceives of this "fully-formed man" of rationality and clarity as a being wholly separate from those various 'others,' those who are not "fully-formed": children, animals, 'primitive' peoples. As we saw, Merleau-Ponty criticizes or deconstructs this classical attitude of presumptive mastery and independence, showing that it corresponds to no living perspective whatsoever: the perfectly laid-out visible world of perspective painting is a world perceived by no one, just as the perfectly rational, external understanding of the world divorced from the 'deception' of the senses is an understanding held by no one. But, importantly, Merleau-Ponty does not conclude from this that the ideal of maturity, or the pursuit of knowledge, are thereby tainted or inherently problematic. Rather, what he sees in the attitude of modernity is another way of taking up the ideal and the demand of maturity, precisely by way of acknowledging that there is no "fully-formed man," and never could be.

[328] It is notable that Foucault, amid his praise of Kant's text and his insightful rendering of it as an expression of the attitude of modernity, avoids affirming Kant's evocation of maturity, writing simply, "I do not know whether we will ever reach mature adulthood. Many things in our experience convince us that the historical event of the Enlightenment did not make us mature adults, and we have not reached that stage yet" (Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", 49). My sense is that Foucault here conceives of maturity in the form of a finished self-mastery, to which he prefers the critical interrogation of the present he locates as the true virtue of Kant's text. In seeing maturity as something other than mastery and independence, however, I think we can retrieve the force of Kant's project while acknowledging the limitations of the classical Enlightenment in its way of conceiving emancipation and rationality.

Merleau-Ponty's evocation of childhood in these lectures also recalls the larger concern of this Conclusion, which is to consider what I have shown to be the strongest philosophical objection to this dissertation's animating idea of the constitutiveness of self-consciousness and of the *question* of identity: namely, what I have called the 'innocence of experience' thesis, according to which primary or true experiences are innocent of the self-relation and self-consciousness which mark a subsequent fall out of this lived immediacy. One way of revering childhood, which I have here identified in Nietzsche's evocation of the ancient nobility as the lost childhood and innocence of humanity, is to mourn the loss of its supposedly pure immersion in life, prior to the falsifications of a self-consciousness that separates itself from primary experience by judging the things it encounters according to the categories of truth, reason, and morality. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, while sharing Nietzsche's critique of a rational humanity's imagined superiority over and fundamental separation from the child, offers neither nostalgia for a lost childhood nor a rejection of the category of adulthood or maturity, but argues instead that maturity must involve taking on responsibility for one's activity in the world as the self-conscious being one is. The "adult human being" is one who can "look at himself without indulgence," and "rediscover within himself the whole host of fantasies, dreams, patterns of magical behaviour and obscure phenomena which remain all-powerful in shaping both his private and public life and his relationships with other people."[329] The adult, in other words, is not someone who stands separate from the obscurity and ambiguity of a less-than-fully-rational existence, but rather demonstrates their adulthood precisely by acknowledging that they remain beholden to the limitations of their personal and social history and their biological life, as conditions which they never step outside of or attain mastery over, but which are

[329] Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 72-3.

constitutively present to any rational, mature activity. One is mature precisely insofar as one is capable of acknowledging that one is not 'fully' mature, and that there is no full or finished maturity.

8. Innocence or Infantile Narcissism

It may be observed that the idea according to which 'childhood' is the name for a form of experience without, or prior to, the formation of a 'self' – an idea that I have suggested we can find in Nietzsche – has something ambiguous about it. For if the distinction of this childhood or innocence is that one is so fully immersed in life as to be unburdened by self-consciousness of how one is perceived by others, there is a sense in which this primary, immersive form of life is not that of an absence of self, but of a complete saturation of experience by one's own immediate desire: a primary, infantile narcissism. Nietzsche's account of the ancient nobility expresses something of this ambiguity: on the one hand, the nobles are not 'subjects' or 'selves' insofar as they are aware of no distinction between what is good for themselves and what is good as such, and locate in themselves (as well as in others) no possibility of acting otherwise than how it is 'natural' to act, such that the questions of *who one takes oneself to be* and *what one should do* never arise, because they simply, unthinkingly 'know' who they are and what they are to do. But Nietzsche is clear that this subjectlessness does not amount to a lack of self-regard; rather, he praises the nobles for the unquestioning innocence with which they relate to everything they encounter in terms of their own pleasure and enjoyment; what is proper to them is 'good,' while what is proper to others is 'bad'. This primary narcissism of the nobility is something like a Freudian picture of the infant who acts entirely on the

pleasure principle, who has not yet learnt to sublimate their immediate urges as a condition of participating in a civilization that operates according to universal norms and laws. As Nietzsche states plainly, it is the slaves' primary fixation upon *others* rather than themselves which marks what he considers their perversity, and which produces their *ressentiment*: "While all noble morality grows from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says no to an 'outside', to an 'other', to a 'non-self': and *this* no is its creative act. The reversal of the evaluating gaze – this necessary orientation outwards rather than inwards to the self – belongs characteristically to *ressentiment*."[330]

We can understand the co-existence of these two points in Nietzsche's account, which on one level seem contradictory – that the ancient nobility who represent humanity's childhood are entirely oriented towards themselves in the form of the fulfilment of their own desires, and yet entirely lacking the self-consciousness characteristic of a 'subject' – if we recall that the emergence of subjectivity, for Nietzsche, involves the introduction of a distinction between 'is' and 'ought,' between an *actor* and their *possible acts*, among which certain possible acts may be judged better or truer than others. This form of self-consciousness is developed through an awareness of the perspective of *others*, with universal conceptions of morality and truth created in response to one's dissatisfaction with how one is seen by others. Whereas the infantile narcissism of a happy nobility encounters everything in its path in terms of its own immediate self-interest, without needing any pause to consider *who I am*, *what I am doing*, or *why I am doing it*, the self-regard of 'subjects' has first passed through the gaze of others, with subjectivity announced in the proud declaration that they are *not* what

[330] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 22.

these others have taken them to be. The primary narcissism of immediate self-interest and the absence of reflective self-consciousness are therefore two ways of expressing the 'innocence' of this noble childhood of humanity.

Yet while there is a sense to Nietzsche's description of the nobility as both a- or pre-subjective and as concerned utterly, unreflectively, with themselves, I do want to suggest that by recognising the attitude of noble innocence as a kind of infantile narcissism, we have to introduce a dynamism that the nostalgic picture Nietzsche often reverts to doesn't allow. That is, in observing a primary self-regard on the part of the nobility in their interactions with the world, we are led to see that the development of a reflective self-consciousness is not a historic perversion of a natural state, but is as necessary as the development from infancy to adolescence. My above evocation of Sigmund Freud can help in articulating this point. Freud's paper, "On Narcissism," offers a way of understanding infantile narcissism in such dynamic terms: for what Freud shows is that such narcissism is in fact always developed through an *interpersonal* relationship. The paradigmatic form of this dynamic of narcissism is that between the infant and their parent(s). As Freud outlines, the narcissism of the infant operates in tandem with the parents' affection towards them, which reveals itself to be "a revival and reproduction of [the parents'] own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned." Freud describes this parental narcissism expressed through affection towards their child as follows:

> [T]hey are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child – which sober observation would find no occasion to do – and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings. (Incidentally, the denial of sexuality in children is connected with this.) Moreover, they are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour;

> he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – 'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves.[331]

Freud seems to me to insufficiently account for the phenomenon he describes here when he speaks of the parental narcissism as simply a 'remembering' of a primary infantile narcissism that existed in itself. What is strange is that even while suggesting that the parent relives through their children a narcissism they themselves felt as a child, he acknowledges that there is in fact a violence to this affectionate gaze: the parent who asserts their child's limitless bounty of freedom and enjoyment will also deny this child's sexuality, a denial which will likely involve not only a blinding of themselves but an admonishment of the child when they engage in behaviour deemed inappropriate. As such, the parent's narcissism expressed through affection for the child can hardly be a simple repetition of a childish narcissism of their own, for why would a child immersed in an 'innocent' narcissism of self-satisfaction censor their own pursuit of sexual pleasure? The link between the denial of sexuality and the denial of "shortcomings" and "restrictions" upon the child surely has to do with the fact that sexuality, like the fragility experienced in the encounter with illness or death, involve the child's turning away from the parent's gifts, towards a private experience of their own: in the choice of a sexual object and the self-discovery it initiates, as in the experience of illness or any other negative feeling that restricts satisfaction and the sense of power, the child turns away from the other's image of them as contented in innocent self-assertion, by discovering a realm of personal experience that no one else can be the author of. It seems to me that what Freud is describing in this account of the interpersonal dynamic of infantile narcissism is the constitution of the child's image of themselves in part through acceptance of the parent's image of them, which is marked as much by censorship and violence as by affection (the affection itself *is*, in part, a form of censorship). Freud's

[331] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, 556.

signature phrase for describing this infantile narcissism – "His Majesty the Baby" – expresses this very ambiguity with regard to *whose* narcissism is really at stake, for it involves the baby taking on the status of an object ("His Majesty"). Rather than simply leading to the conclusion that "we once fancied ourselves" in this way, Freud's very presentation of the dynamic of infantile narcissism reveals that the parent's own narcissistic attitude of affection is necessary to the constitution of this infantile narcissism itself, by giving the child an image of themselves as special, insofar as they remain within the borders of a life of unconcerned plenty which can be considered a gift of the affectionate parent.

But what is most crucial is that this internalised image, since it is not a product of the child's spontaneous experience or sense of themselves, can eventually be recognised for its foreign origin and renounced by the child in the course of their own development. Such renunciation is essential to the experience of adolescence: the recognition that one's parents and other authorities are *just people*, that the rules and conventions one has grown up with and accepted as natural and proper are the contingent products of *some people's actions*, which can be challenged, contested, or disobeyed. In so doing, I want to suggest, one disavows this infantile narcissism, realising that it never was so 'innocent'. Reaction 'against nature' arises in the life of every child, when they recognise that their own most 'innocent' enjoyment was the object of another's narcissism, an other who thereby reveals their own fragility and dependence upon the child to deliver up the image of the contented recipient of their gifts, a dependence which the adolescent can now exploit by refusing to satisfy it. The *ressentiment* of the adolescent towards the parent's or teacher's authority is soon enough met by the *ressentiment* of the parent or teacher towards the adolescent for their entry into a private realm of experience and self-assertion from which they are excluded.

The point I mean to draw from this discussion is not that there is no reality to infantile narcissism, but that it is constituted through a living relationship based in fragility and dependence – not only the dependence of the child on the parent as caregiver, but equally the dependence of the parent on the child's *recognition* of them as caregiver.[332] The most innocent of experiences, the most immediate self-assertion in one's contact with the world, is already discriminating and evaluative, responsive to the demands and expectations of others, but in a way which makes perpetually possible the revision of that response: that the child's self-conception is at least in part constituted in reception of the parent's demand is equally what enables the rejection of this demand at a subsequent moment, since the child had to already be present to the reception of a self-image bestowed by the parent in order to receive it and take it on (and in reality, some ambivalence will be found at each of these moments, never dividing neatly into an initial moment of acceptance and a later moment of rejection). Rebellion against nature and the self-consciousness that comes with it do not amount to an historical event which might not have happened, but are proper to the experience of being a person.

The point here is not to criticise Nietzsche for historical inaccuracy, but to show that what he conceives of as a primary moment of internal fulfilment is already from the beginning both receptive and self-conscious, however minimally, however much that self-consciousness may require time and experience to become explicit. The child is receiving an image of themselves from another in the very activity of immersive and self-assertive enjoyment, and yet is minimally aware in doing so of the other's dependence upon their acceptance of this role: the infant knows they will be rewarded for certain behaviours and

[332] My reading of Beckett's *Fin de partie* in Chapter Two, above, explores precisely this dynamic in the relationship between Hamm and Clov.

punished or ignored for others (such as, on Freud's account, expressions of sexual curiosity). Freud writes elsewhere of the process by which a child develops from locating in their parental figures the object of desired recognition, and thus of potential disappointment and frustration, to locating this object in the world at large.[333] My point again would be that the capacity of individuals to undergo this transition speaks to the fact that even in the earliest experience of the parent as unquestioned figure of authority and object of desired recognition, the child is minimally attuned to this object's fragility and inconstancy, and responds as much to the parent's vulnerability as to their power and authority in taking on the role of the contented child that has been asked of them. And it is because the child is minimally aware that they are taking on this role in response to others' demands that they can later acknowledge the arbitrariness of these demands and refuse them, thereby ushering in their adolescence.

9. Maturity, Responsibility, Freedom

Adolescence, of course, is not maturity: it is both a misrecognition of itself *as* maturity and an essential step (*the* essential step) towards genuine maturity. Kant's formulation about the passage to maturity needs to be supplemented, I wish to suggest (following Robert B. Brandom), by this further distinction between maturity and adolescence.[334] The straightforward reaction against one's immature faith in figures of authority, by revealing the arbitrariness of this authority and the vulnerability of those who once seemed so powerful, and asserting one's own independence as a free capacity to spontaneously make and live by

[333] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Freud Reader*, 758.
[334] My framing of this discussion of maturity as the dialectical unity and transcendence of childhood belonging and adolescent independence is indebted to Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Harvard University Press, 2019), which argues that Hegel's philosophy pursues such a form of maturity, responsibility, and reconciliation, going beyond what Brandom calls the "adolescence" of Kantian independence. See especially pp. 471-2.

one's own rules, can here be understood as the attitude of adolescence, which remains to be differentiated from maturity proper. My aim in this Conclusion is to argue that the form of self-consciousness that I have shown in the preceding chapters to be operative in and cultivated by the works of such modernists as Flaubert, Beckett, and Godard corresponds to this attitude of maturity, which is characterised not by independence and mastery, but by *responsibility*. To be responsible is neither to unquestioningly accept the validity of the laws, norms, and figures of authority one meets with, nor to simply assert one's own independence as a refusal of such external authority. It is rather to acknowledge at once one's own authority over one's actions and one's dependence upon and vulnerability to others, by holding oneself responsible for what one does, as a member of an intersubjective community to which one is not simply *subjected* but to which one is a living contributor. If the childhood acceptance of and fascination with the world as it is given to experience offers a sense of belonging, and if the adolescent rejection of the naturalness of this world through exposing the fragility and self-regard of its figures of authority attains a form of freedom at the price of alienation from any sense of belonging, then maturity unites belonging and freedom through responsibility. In acting responsibly, I recognise that the social world I inhabit is not natural or fixed, but I equally recognise my own freedom as tied to this social world, which I can influence only through acknowledging my debt to it, and by acknowledging the fact that it is only through this social world which goes beyond me that I can be recognised at all.

This Conclusion has turned at such length to the figures of childhood and innocence in order to problematise the idea that a wholly 'innocent experience' – whether it is articulated in Nietzschean terms of an immediate, unrepressed self-assertion of the will-to-power, or in the more standard empiricist terms of what William James calls the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of infancy – is comprehensible or coherent as a state of experience at

all.[335] The most infantile self-assertion is already minimally self-conscious, insofar as one is always asserting oneself within the context of implicit norms of behaviour, which one adopts through acknowledging what is and what is not recognised and valued by others. Since (infantile) narcissism is a social relation that is experienced through the fulfilment of roles, it always has the potential to transform into (adolescent) *ressentiment*, as a rejection of these roles and an assertion of independence. The former is coherent only insofar as it is always already open to becoming the latter, such that it makes no sense to speak of infancy as a lost or desirable form of pure experience (even as we can certainly acknowledge that some valuable things about childhood experience may not be available in the same ways as one enters the world of adults). Maturity is then the recognition that one never escapes social roles – since who one is, including one's most private self-conception, is always impacted by others, articulated in a language inherited from others – together with the recognition of one's own freedom to redetermine these roles and their social meaning, and to thereby impact the social world itself, seeing one's own freedom in participating in its norms.

I have sought here to problematise or deconstruct various appeals to the innocence of a supposed pre-personal or pre-subjective experience, because appeals to such a realm of experience are so often tied to the idea that freedom is to be found in some reclamation of this pre-subjective state. It is such an idea of freedom as the renunciation of selfhood that I have responded to critically throughout this dissertation, locating it particularly in Rancière's writings on Flaubert, Adorno's writings on Beckett, and in writings on Godard by Silverman and Farocki and by Bersani and Dutoit. I have further located it in Sartre's philosophy (as well as, in this Conclusion, Nietzsche's), with its clearest statement expressed in Sartre's major early text, *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Sartre's negative conception of freedom as a

[335] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 462.

freedom from the determinacy of identity has been a point of reference throughout this dissertation, firstly because it is in response to it that many of the central ideas of Merleau-Ponty's thought – which I have drawn upon throughout in developing the approach to identity presented here – were articulated. It is my further argument that the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty attains profound relevance to the contemporary humanities because of its account of subjectivity as constitutive in and through its primary receptivity, expressed by his thesis of the primacy of perception.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers an alternative to what, in the above Introduction, I argued is a widespread tendency of the contemporary humanities – inherited to a great extent from the poststructuralism that first emerged in France in the years following Merleau-Ponty's death – namely, to locate freedom in the *flight from identity*. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, defends neither the idea of a primary self that would somehow precede and stand apart from one's sensuous contact with the world, nor the idea that selfhood is some secondary derivation through which one takes a fundamental distance from a primary immersion in sensuous experience; rather, he provides a framework for understanding subjectivity and self-consciousness as *co-constitutive* with a primary receptivity. While some of his statements on these questions at points in his writings are less definitive, I argue that there is a clear line of thinking, expressed both in the thesis of the primacy of perception of the 1940s and in the concept of perceptual faith in his unfinished final work of the early 1960s, which locates subjectivity as a constitutive, minimally self-conscious capacity to discrimate within one's perceptual field in light of one's developing and normative sense of the world. By grasping, through the notion of perception, the co-constitutiveness of subjectivity – not as an 'agent' separate from one's finite embodiment, but as a self-conscious living being engaged in the activity of locating oneself in the world – and receptivity,

Merleau-Ponty provides the ground for a fundamentally different account of freedom from the negative one found both in Sartre's philosophy and in much of the poststructuralist tradition as it has been inherited in the contemporary humanities. Merleau-Ponty's thinking about freedom amounts to a critical dialogue with the adolescent conception of freedom as the flight from identity and determinacy.

10. "Two ways of being young": Merleau-Ponty and Mature Historical Self-Consciousness

As we saw in the above Introduction, in the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty develops an account of freedom in terms of responsibility through the self-conscious recognition of one's finite embodiment and historical situatedness. Later, in one of his last texts, this question of history and the self-consciousness of one's historical situatedness intersects explicitly with the questions of childhood, youth, and maturity that have been explored here. A brief consideration of this text can allow us to further articulate the stakes of the distinction I am here developing between adolescence and maturity as models of freedom – a distinction which can never be reduced to a dualistic opposition, for maturity can be arrived at only through the experience and lessons of adolescence.

In this text, the Preface to his 1960 essay collection, *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty engages in an extended dialogue with a then-recent text by Sartre, itself the Preface to the republication of *Aden Arabie*, the autobiographical first book by the great friend of Sartre's youth, Paul Nizan. In his Preface, Sartre looks back self-critically on his relationship with Nizan, who was killed in 1940 as a soldier in the Battle of Dunkirk. Merleau-Ponty notes the Sartre of 1960's dismay at his younger self for failing to acknowledge the role of historical

determination in the lives of individuals, which was so evident to the politicized Nizan, who would join the Parti Communiste Français in 1927, then in his early twenties. "I kept telling him [i.e., Nizan], Sartre says, that we are free, and the thin smile at the corner of his mouth which was his only answer said more about it than all my speeches" – thus Merleau-Ponty ventriloquizes Sartre's text.[336] For the Sartre of 1960, the errors of his own precocious, arrogant, idealist youth are to be put in their place by the mature Sartre, who now speaks in recognition of the weight of history upon individual action, thanks to an intervening two decades of political experience that have allowed him to catch up to what the young Nizan already knew.

But, Merleau-Ponty suggests, there is something too easy about this sharp separation between error and truth, youth and adulthood. For one thing, does the self-certainty with which the older Sartre now criticises his younger self not repeat in its own way the very myopia from which he claims to be separating his present self through this self-criticism? A far richer pathos is at stake in the relationship between the two young men, Sartre and Nizan, seen with the hindsight of 1960, than Sartre's self-criticism acknowledges. For whereas the older Sartre, in his very assertion that individual consciousness and freedom are historically limited and defined, retains the idea of a true (and seemingly transhistorical) perspective as straightforwardly separable from false ones (the true perspective now being the Marxist one as Sartre understands it), Merleau-Ponty locates the genuine historical lesson of the miscommunication between these two young men in the ambiguity between their perspectives, as distinct responses to a history that both united and divided them. Nizan's

[336] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 24. Nizan's 1933 novel, *Antoine Bloyé*, would present a fictional life resembling that of his father.

familiarity with the weight of history upon individual life was learnt from his earliest experience, as Merleau-Ponty presents it:

> Nizan had been confiscated by his father's image. He was possessed by the drama (older than he was) of a worker who, having left his class, discovers that his life since then has been unreal and a failure, and ends his days hating himself. Consequently, Nizan knew from the start the weight of childhood, the body, and society, as well as the interwoven ties that bind us to our parents and to history in one single anguish.[337]

From all of this, the young Sartre is protected, living out his youth as if untouched by his origins in a particular family, entirely unconscious of how these origins impose upon a child particular cultural and historical limitations as well as freedoms. Comparing the friends' conflicting experiences, Merleau-Ponty concludes that

> there are two ways of being young, which are not easily comprehensible to one another. Some are fascinated by their childhood; it possesses them, holding them enchanted in a realm of privileged possibilities. Others, it casts out toward adult life; they believe that they have no past and are equally near to all possibilities. Sartre was one of the second type. Thus it was not easy to be his friend. The distance he put between himself and the conditions of his existence also separated him from what others have to live. … In himself and in others, he had to learn that nothing is without roots, and that the decision not to have any is another way of admitting them.[338]

Nizan, the bright young man raised in the shadow of a father destroyed and isolated by his own ambition to escape the working class, abandons philosophy for communism, seemingly in the hope of redeeming a global history whose wounds were visible on his father's body, audible down the hallway of his childhood home. Sartre, the brash Wünderkind, dove headfirst into the philosophy of freedom, impatient with others' sense that they were held back by lives and histories that preceded their own. While for the Sartre of 1960, Nizan was right and he himself was wrong, this easy split forgets the very ambiguity of history that it was Marxism's achievement to express ("history makes irresolute opponents possible because it is ambiguous itself," wrote Merleau-Ponty in an earlier work, *Humanism*

[337] Ibid., 27.
[338] Ibid., 25.

and Terror).[339] The likes of Nizan, those who "prolonged their childhood or wanted to preserve it in going beyond it (and who thus were seeking recipes for salvation)," were limited in their own way and by their own situation, and "had to learn that one does not go beyond what one preserves, that nothing could give them the wholeness they were nostalgic for."[340]

Merleau-Ponty's point is not that a commitment to communism is reducible to the acting out of a childhood fantasy; after all, Sartre himself, whose childhood was lived so differently from Nizan's, would later come to an affinity with communist politics in his own way. It is rather that, as both were products and inheritors of a history they had no advance say in determining, they were "deceived in different ways, and they [each] learned a different lesson from their deception."[341] Nizan, in his eventual disillusionment with the PCF following its support for the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, learns that history offers no outlets for forgetting oneself and one's private drama by attaining an unwaveringly true perspective; while Sartre, in his belated discovery of his own bourgeois privilege as the social basis for his ignorance of the social, discovers that the path of freedom must wind through all the suffering and violence of history. What Merleau-Ponty shows in his reconstruction of the personal history presented in Sartre's text is that it is only through learning the lesson of their own limited perspectives that each of these men attained a greater truth: for Nizan, that of the impossibility of salvation, and for Sartre, that of history. Since their origins imposed limitations upon them, there is no straightforwardly true perspective they can ever attain, one that would not be overdetermined by this origin, even in reaction against it. The older Sartre criticizes his failure to see what Nizan saw, but Nizan's greater historical and political insight

[339] Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: Essay on the Communist Problem*, 78.
[340] *Signs*, 25.
[341] Ibid., 31.

in their youth was necessitated by his own limited origins, and imposed its own existential limitations, in the form of a fixation on a damaged past and a desire to redeem it through immersion in a great historical struggle. The attainment of a greater insight cannot be understood as a taking leave of these origins, as Sartre presents his own path of enlightenment, but rather as the refinement of self-understanding through an enlarged experience that is itself born out of and in response to those origins. Maturity is not freedom *from* origins, as Sartre's self-criticism suggests; it rather requires acknowledging one's origins as a source of one's being, such that, through this acknowledgement, one need no longer be mastered by them (as one is even when one flees them).

Merleau-Ponty provides a model of mature historical understanding through this reading of Sartre's pose of maturity, showing that the latter remains another form of the self-certainty of adolescence. By showing both the errors and insights of Nizan and Sartre's youth to be rooted in a childhood and a familial and social history, which they were not merely subjected to, but took up and responded to in how they each lived, and by further showing how the insights of their later self-criticism and disillusionment with their youthful passions were themselves possible only *through* the experience of error and the reckoning with their own limitations as historical subjects, Merleau-Ponty articulates a vision of historical self-understanding which attains the maturity of acknowledging the debt of every insight to an experience that one has to live through in contact with others and with history. Rather than imagining that the insights of a 'science of history' (which, for Merleau-Ponty, is the wrong way of understanding Marxism) would allow one to attain transhistorical knowledge of history itself, a mature historical self-understanding forgives the limitations of the past by acknowledging that one's present insights remain indebted to it, and that no present perspective removes itself from or attains ahistorical knowledge of the history that it seeks to

understand and to change.[342] By acknowledging the debt of present insight to historical experience, the attitude of maturity takes responsibility for its past errors by recognising their role in constituting the truth which one is now able to express, a truth which acknowledges its own openness to revisability through future insight gained from further experience.[343] This is not a simple matter of acknowledging the relativity of one's own perspective (an epistemological model according to which there are many different perspectives on an inaccessible but pre-existing objective truth), but the deeper acknowledgement that truth as such is the unity of perspectives, lived out historically and never cohering into a single disembodied vision, but leaving its traces in the form of the historical world that present individuals inherit, take up, and ultimately form a part of. "History," Merleau-Ponty writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, "is the unique milieu of our errors and our verifications."[344] Maturity entails the acknowledgement that one is within this space of error and verification in one's present activity, recognising that one's own actions and insights take up their full meaning only in contact with others, and through a collective history that will go beyond one's own life and beyond the knowledge one had in the present moment of acting.

[342] "What we cannot imagine is a consciousness without a future and a history with an end. Thus, as long as there are men, the future will be open and there will only be a probabilistic calculation and no absolute knowledge." Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 92.
[343] "[T]he truth of Marxism is not the truth one attributes to the natural sciences, the similarity of an idea and its external ideatum; it is rather *nonfalsity*, the maximum guarantee against error that men may demand and get. The theoretician and the proletarians have to make a history in which they are included. They are therefore, at the same time, subjects and objects of their undertaking, and this creates for them a simultaneous possibility of understanding history, of finding a truth in it, and of being mistaken as to its developing meaning. We can say, then, that there is truth when there is no disagreement between the theoreticians and the proletarians, when the political idea is not challenged by known facts, although one can never be sure that it will not be challenged at some future date. Truth itself is then conceived as a process of indefinite verification. … The *Stimmung* of Lukács, and, we believe, of Marxism, is thus the conviction of being, not in the truth, but on the threshold of truth." Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 30-1.
[344] *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 31.

11. Modernist Maturity and Theatrical Adolescence

Like philosophy, modernist art cultivates this attainment of maturity as the acknowledgement of finitude and social-historical boundedness, often through returning to scenes of adolescence, in order to distinguish its own capacity to render complexity from the adolescent pose of maturity as mastery, independence, and an unbounded, infinite perspective. Following the argument developed above, this critical insight into the adolescent errors of the attitude of mastery attains genuine force when understood not as an external critique from on high (a critique which would only reproduce the attitude of mastery it criticises in others), but as an immanent critique of failures in an ongoing effort to work out who we are, how the world works, and what we can do in engagement with it, an effort which the present moment of maturity recognises itself to be a part of. Beckett's Hamm is a supreme figure of the delusions endemic to the attitude of mastery, a character about whom the phrase evoked by Freud, 'His Majesty the baby,' might have been coined. No adult reveals their own childishness more than when they demand to be obeyed as an unquestioned authority, like Hamm brandishing his gaff. The adolescent assertion of mastery and independence remains bound to the infancy it explicitly renounces, as the self-proclaimed master fails to recognise that their proud assertion of dominance only carries on a childhood conversation with their parents, who have to be renounced and undermined in order that the individual can feel they have attained mastery (Hamm's relationship to his 'son' Clov on the one hand, and his father Nagg on the other, exemplifies this). Beckett draws from Flaubert as much as anyone in how he presents the failure of this model of authority, by letting it wear itself out in its monstrous, bloated performance of itself, placing it against the backdrop of an indifferent, "corpsed" world, Hamm's grandiose language like a further perversion of the self-importance of Homais, taking a world of language as cliché and convention to the point

where subjects bear witness to their own deterioration through the deterioration of language.[345]

Flaubert's Comices Agricoles sequence, analysed above in Chapter One, offers its own critique of the false maturity of the attitude of mastery and independence, opening to ironic reflection both the empty vanity of Rodolphe's manipulation of Emma and Emma's own naïve acceptance of the idea of her salvation and transcendence of worldly pettiness through romantic love. Emma believes she is 'coming of age' in this moment, stepping away from the 'false' stage of the fair and its speeches so as to occupy the 'true' stage of full recognition through her lover, finally taking up her true role as a romantic heroine, a role which life's hideous contingencies have previously denied her. Her version of the adolescent error of mastery is the fantasy that she has graduated from the false roles imposed by a contingent origin to the true role attained through the ideal other's recognition of her specialness. The maturity cultivated by the modernist text is that of acknowledging that there is no true stage onto which one steps, and no true role through which one is saved by a final recognition of who one truly is, while simultaneously acknowledging that we are responsible for the roles we hold in the world (even when this responsibility requires us to abandon one role in pursuit of another), for we have no existence as ourselves except through and in relation to the roles that make us recognisable to others. Even when these recognitions are

[345] Fredric Jameson has written of Beckett's late plays that "the shock lies in discovering, at the heart of these eternally recurring spectacles, an empirical situation – unhappy marriage, intolerable youthful memories, a banal family structure, with irreducible names and characters, the bourgeois dwelling at a certain date, the punctual biographical events that stand out unredeemably from the failure of a drab and sorry life – which might have offered the material of a dreary realist novel and instead persists as the indigestible brute facts to which the form reverts over and over again in its vain attempt to dissolve them" (Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, 209). While this well describes the formal operations of works such as *Play*, *Not I*, *Rockaby*, or *That Time*, I would suggest that the achievement of such a formally severe reworking of the material of life which problematizes this material's capacity to be recuperated within a narrative does not simply involve the repetition of trauma that besets Beckett's characters, but equally shows the capacity of art to unmoor the facts of life from their conventional ordering within a narrative. Even in the gloom of irrecuperable suffering it expresses, the modernist reworking of the narrative conventions of a prior literary mode announces the power of art to unhinge life from its familiar settings, opening it to being looked at differently.

dissatisfying and we set out to refute them, demanding something more for ourselves than the identity others recognise, we do so by rearticulating the roles we hold and demanding a different social recognition of our identity. To once again quote MacIntyre's important formulation, "rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it."[346]

The modernist text allows us to acknowledge that there is always another scene, another stage, whose coexistence with our own puts our self-assigned narratives and roles in question, and solicits us to bear this acknowledgement in how we live, through the activity of seeing our lives as narratives and ourselves as 'characters,' limited by our circumstances, free in our capacity to acknowledge and assume them. As Auerbach writes, Emma Bovary is comprehended "simply in the articulated naming of her subjective existence passing beyond its own limits."[347] As I proposed in Chapter One in light of Auerbach's remark, what distinguishes people from fictional characters is that the former have the capacity to perform this reflexive activity upon themselves, acknowledging their own limited situatedness and dependence on the recognition of others in their own ongoing, living activity.

Michael Fried argues that modernism takes up a critical relationship to the "theatricality" to which art is in perpetual danger of being reduced.[348] The Comices Agricoles sequence seems to exemplify Fried's idea: in presenting with the great artistry of juxtaposition the theatricality of this scene, in which characters stupidly play their roles (including those who believe they are escaping their assigned roles and discovering their true and secret identities), Flaubert saves art from the theatrical condition it presents, seemingly at the price of an ironic detachment from life. By reframing Fried's insight in terms of the

[346] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205.
[347] Auerbach, "On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday," 431.
[348] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Blackwell, 1993), 822-834.

distinction between infancy, adolescence, and maturity, I want to rearticulate the claim of the preceding chapters that modernism can be approached in terms not of a removal from life but rather of a *renewal* of life, by means of a *forgiveness* of the theatricality of the life we have been living and the world we have been inhabiting, through modernism's own framing and containment of this theatricality.[349] While Fried will write of the depiction of *absorption* in eighteenth-century painting as a means of saving art from the garishness of theatricality, by presenting subjects so absorbed in their immediate activity that their depiction protects the artwork from acknowledging and allowing itself to be reduced to its to-be-looked-at-ness, Flaubert's modernism engages with this problem in what I would consider a more dynamic and philosophically suggestive way.[350]

As we have seen, the characters Flaubert depicts are utterly theatrical, in their embarrassing performances of their conceptions of themselves, seeking to find or cultivate the 'right' audience (even when, as in Rodolphe's case, this audience is himself). It is precisely through his knowing but silent presentation of the garish, self-conscious theatricality of his characters that Flaubert saves his novel from the same theatricality; but it is thus saved not through the trick of depicting absorption and lulling its reader into the fantasy that they are encountering an enchanted world unblemished by the vanity of self-consciousness, but rather by soliciting a self-conscious attention of readers *to* the self-conscious theatricality of his characters as a failed model of personhood. This is thus a more forgiving, positive, and dialectical defeat of theatricality than the one carried out through depicting absorption, for in our mature reckoning with the failure of Flaubert's characters we acknowledge that our own self-consciousness of human failure has had to pass through and

[349] The notion of forgiveness suggested here is also indebted to Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust*, esp. 596-600 and 744-757.
[350] Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*.

see its way beyond the adolescent self-consciousness of the attitude of mastery and independence that these characters fall prey to: it does not allow us to *forget* the self-consciousness that is a condition of life and art by conjuring a fantasy of unself-conscious absorption, but instead enables us to *forgive* the adolescent ways in which we have proclaimed our maturity by declaring proudly that *we are who we say we are*, not realising that in doing so we show our theatrical need to perform our self-proclaimed identity, and inadvertently reveal the dependence of that identity upon the recognition of others.

Madame Bovary is a novel populated by characters who reveal their unacknowledged, residual childishness precisely through their desperation to perform their own adulthood; it is also a novel from whose fictional world unself-conscious absorption in experience or activity – the figure of childhood innocence *par excellence* – is strikingly absent.[351] Emma cannot perform that most paradigmatically absorbing activity – reading – without assuming the posture and manner she takes to be that of the kind of person who reads books. But the point is not that she is stupid, while Flaubert's reader is smart in their cynicism, or wise in their romantic valorisation of a lost pre-modern, childlike absorption. Emma's behaviour and her life express one – insufficient – way of taking up the challenge of living responsibly in the acknowledgement that one is a person in the world, that one affects and is affected by others in everything one does and in the very constitution of who one is. The truth is that no one ever picks up and starts reading a book without taking themselves to be a person reading a book, and the experience of absorption in what one reads to the point of 'forgetting oneself'

[351] The closest exception to this rule is surely Charles Bovary, who remains in a state of childlike shyness. It is still, in his case, inadequate to call this a lack of self-consciousness, and it seems more appropriate to say that he is so self-conscious of standing out and not fitting in that he is unable to act purposefully – a sentiment exemplified by the novel's opening scene of his arrival at the classroom with his extraordinary hat, and pursued through Flaubert's strange use of an unidentified narratorial "We" in these opening lines, serving to locate Charles as a figure seen and judged from a foreign and mocking perspective from the novel's opening words. I am thankful to Mark Wilson for helping me make sense of the opening of the novel in these terms.

is powerful because of how it expands one's sense of the possibilities of the world and of one's own capacity to engage in it. Absorption is not the absence of self-consciousness, but the cultivation of a capacity to put the modes of being one has inhabited in question, and to find new forms of expression and interaction, new ways of being oneself. The garish theatricality of adolescent performances of independence is comprehended by the mature gaze of the modernist text and the reader or beholder it seeks to cultivate, because it sees that these desperate declarations of adulthood retain a childishness in their very pronouncement, with the unspoken words "Look at me!" lingering in the air and flattening the credibility of every such eager self-assertion. The modernist text attains maturity by containing and reframing this theatricality, so as to cultivate, not a retreat from self-consciousness, but a greater responsibility in acknowledging that who we are is never separable from, but always involved with and responsive to, the ways that others perceive us.

12. Mature Cinematic Modernism and the Forgiving of Adolescence

Fried has also argued that cinema, because it does not present itself 'live' before an audience, does not face the problem of theatricality – it does not have to protect itself from the threat of becoming theatrical, Fried thinks, because it is in the mechanical nature of cinema to evade theatricality altogether. But since modernism on Fried's account is defined precisely by its *struggle* against theatricality, its effort to wrest genuine artistic expression away from the theatrical conventionality and obviousness it is permanently at risk of succumbing to, Fried concludes that, while it is generally "acceptable to modernist sensibility" as inoffensive, "the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art."[352] I find Fried's conclusion as bewildering as I find his individual insights compelling. Stanley Cavell, who acknowledged

[352] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 164.

the influence of Fried's framing of the differences between theatre and cinema upon his work of film-philosophy, *The World Viewed*, nonetheless offers a way of seeing cinema as engaged precisely in that problematising and enframing of theatricality proper to modernism. In the afterword to that work's second edition (simply entitled "More of *The World Viewed*"), Cavell identifies in the films of Jean Renoir a specifically cinematic reaction to theatricality: "When society has become fully theatricalized," he writes, "cinema reestablishes our sense of reality by asserting its own powers of drama."[353] Renoir's films show a world of human beings reduced to the enactment of character-types, but in depicting this situation of society with a cinematic gaze that never simply presents this theatrical world on its self-understood terms but rather frames this theatrical condition *as* the film's true content, they achieve what I have here described as the maturity of modernism, comprehending a world of self-conscious theatricality and thereby opening up a deeper self-consciousness of the fragility and dependency of the roles we perform.

What is at stake for my purposes here is not the validity of Cavell's reading of Renoir, but the idea of a cinematic modernism's engagement with and reframing of theatricality, understood in my terms as an adolescent mode of self-assertion that awaits its mature surpassing and forgiving. It is to another work of cinematic modernism I wish to turn briefly now in order to bring together the points made so far about how modernist texts often return to 'adolescent' scenes of the theatrical performance of the self, precisely in order to reframe and surpass them, in a way which captures the pathos of their mistakes about themselves and seeks to make possible other ways of looking, and other ways of living. The sequence in question presents a paradigmatic 'coming of age' ritual, a culturally sanctioned performance of the passage to adulthood. Like Flaubert's proto-cinematic Comices Agricoles sequence, it

[353] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 225-6.

presents a young woman in the experience of feeling herself transformed from nothing to everything, from off-stage to centre stage, in receiving an unprecedented form of attention, and painfully reveals what is mistaken in this self-understanding. It presents two essential states of feeling corresponding to this awkward age – pride and shame – while making available to its viewer an acknowledgement of a complex reality that neither of these states of feeling is able to process; and it is this acknowledgement, made available through cinematic means, which constitutes the sequence's achievement of a modernist maturity. This sequence may be judged cinema's truest adaptation of the Comices Agricoles, a scene whose cinematic qualities were first proclaimed by Sergei Eisenstein.[354] I am referring to the climactic prom sequence from Brian De Palma's 1976 film, *Carrie*.

Carrie White is a shy teenager who lives alone with her mother, a tyrannical religious fanatic who has kept her daughter ignorant of everything to do with sexual maturation; when she learns that Carrie has had her first period – a traumatic experience for Carrie, being entirely unprepared for it – she punishes her for the sin of 'becoming a woman.' Raised in an environment in which any entry into the world, any outlet of self-discovery and openness to others, is regarded as threatening and responded to with shocking violence, Carrie experiences the world in waves of emotion, like a child unable to grapple with the states of feeling that overcome her, crippled by the sense of being out of place and lacking the resources to temper her emotions through situating herself in the world. Little able to express her reactions directly in a way that might open up communication with others and help her to situate herself, Carrie discovers a force within herself which acts out her emotional responses to threatening situations in a way which, at least at first, bypasses her conscious will: the power of telekinesis. But, as she begins to find a place in the social world and to feel

[354] Sergei M. Eisenstein "Through Theater to Cinema," in *Film Form*.

recognised, she starts to learn to control and positively harness these powers, in a way which corresponds to the discovery that entry into adulthood and sexual maturity does not need to be experienced as a terrifying and threatening force of evil to be resisted. When her mother tries to forbid her from going to her senior prom, denouncing the sinfulness of sexual awakening that it represents, Carrie tries to tell her that the world is more complex than her Manichaean and puritanical view comprehends, that it is possible to live well in it: "Everyone isn't bad, Mama. Everything isn't a sin." She recognises her own capacity to do something about her situation, to begin to grow as herself by entering a world with others: "I want start to try to be a whole person." When physical force and zealous words of damnation fail to keep Carrie in her place, her mother turns to the weapon of shame in a final effort to prevent her from leaving for the prom: "They're all gonna laugh at you!" This, too, is unsuccessful at stopping her.

Two 'plots' within the fictional world dovetail in bringing Carrie to the prom: one benign, the other malign. The benign plot is crafted by a classmate, Sue, who feels guilty for participating in an earlier collective mockery of Carrie, and convinces her boyfriend, the star athlete Tommy Ross, to ask Carrie to the prom in order to help her socialise and fit in. The malign plot is crafted by another classmate, Chris, the archetypal mean girl, who despises Carrie for her awkwardness, and orchestrates a plot to shame and humiliate her in front of the whole class. Carrie's initially joyful coming of age has been staged twice over, and will come to its gruesome conclusion upon an actual stage, onto which she steps to receive her crown as Prom Queen. Chris, however, has fixed the vote in Carrie's favour, in a ploy to have her come to the stage and feel the pride of recognition and belonging, putting her at her most vulnerable for the moment of humiliation she, Chris, has planned. In an elaborate long take lasting 130 seconds, DePalma's camera diverts away from the central action of Tommy and

Carrie enjoying their date, to reveal the plot that is being prepared for them: first tracking laterally across the hall, following one of Chris's conspirators collecting ballots and replacing them with illegitimate ones, the shot then takes us to the side of the stage, where Chris is revealed hiding under the stairs, preparing her surprise. Tracking in closer to the action now, the camera moves in a straight line across the side of the stage to the back, briefly revealing Sue, who has arrived in order to check on how the evening is going, before rising vertically in line with the stage's side wall, and finally across to take its place looking down from above centre stage, where it reveals the centrepiece of Chris's plot: a bucket of pig's blood nestles in the rafters above the stage, attached to a rope whose other end Chris holds, waiting for Carrie to step into place before pulling it and sending the blood down onto her. In its final moments, the shot completes its full circle of the space of the hall, zooming in from its place atop the stage to again show Tommy and Carrie at their table, as they are pronounced Prom King and Queen. Establishing for its viewer this spatial and narrative unity, exceeding with its cinematic eye the capacities of any present, living eye within the scene, this pivotal shot allegorises the film's own act of *framing* Carrie (in every sense of that word), staging her for a spectatorial gaze, as if suggesting the film's own culpability in Chris's malevolence.

We now witness Carrie's moment of glory in slow motion, as she and Tommy ascend to the stage, beaming in response to the attention and applause. Sue belatedly follows the same line of sight that the camera has just traced for us, looking up and across at the bucket – now teetering directly above Carrie, who has taken her place on stage – then down the length of rope to see Chris's hands gripping it below the stage. But she is unable to stop anything, thrown out by Carrie's supportive teacher, who thinks Sue is there to get in the way of Carrie's big moment. After the bucket of blood is brought down, splattering Carrie from head to toe, she gazes out at the stunned audience, and her mother's words come back to her, in a

recurring loop: “They’re all gonna laugh at you!” Although the crowd’s initial response is one of dumbfounded shock, as these words repeat, we see the audience members – including the supportive teacher, Miss Collins – laughing at Carrie, though we know that the images we are seeing must be Carrie’s own distortion of what is happening. With the trauma of this moment, Carrie loses all ability to acknowledge complexity in the way she had earlier begun to do, reducing all members of the crowd to the homogeneity of a laughing, hateful mob. Now it is Carrie who will constitute the hall as a unity, as she takes her revenge on all who are within it, bringing elements of the space together like a conductor leading an orchestra, her telekinetic powers now keenly focused on destruction. De Palma now represents the totality of this space not through a slow and deliberate tracking shot, but through a split-screen image, conveying how Carrie’s powers allow her to perform multiple operations at once, uniting multiple scenes of action through the divine violence she brings down on them in unison.

The modernist gestures of De Palma’s construction of this sequence – the cinematic means he uses to *frame* the scene even as he *presents* it – entail, I want to suggest, precisely that transcendence through acknowledgement and forgiveness of the adolescent, theatrical mode of asserted independence which I have here been calling the maturity of modernism. The film’s framing of Carrie’s moment in the spotlight warns its viewer of the danger of entering too unguardedly into the fantasy of the ‘coming-of-age’ as a ritual one can pass through and be granted perfect and true recognition. No one can blame her for beaming with pride at suddenly receiving a recognition beyond anything she has ever experienced or expected, just as no one can blame her for the shame and rage that overcome her following the cruelty she suffers. But the film suggests the possibility of another way of looking from that available to Carrie, one which comprehends that every stage has wings and a backstage,

that every narrative intersects with and is rewritten by other narratives, and that one must bear this knowledge in how one lives, in the narratives and roles one takes up as one's own. By framing its aborted coming-of-age story within a comprehending gaze that sees beyond it, the film both acknowledges the force of these blinding emotions and envisions a way through them; a way through which, as in *Madame Bovary*, cannot be made within the fictional world, but is offered to the spectator as a way of seeing unavailable to those immersed in their given narratives.

The shifting emotional register – between shame and pride – plays on a tension of adolescence, with the pride of opening oneself up to the world as a person in one's own right making one vulnerable to the shame of being seen to fail in this endeavour. Remaining at home may protect from public shame, but at the price of denying the possibility of pride in oneself. To be proud is to feel recognised, while to be ashamed is to feel *seen through*; and the same experiences can threaten to teeter between the two, like that teetering bucket of blood. In presenting so vividly these primal emotional states experienced by Carrie, to the point where they are sublated by the frightening calm of her destructive violence, the film delivers up their blinding power; but its continual reframing of its plot as an object of the cinematic gaze suggests that these states of feeling can themselves become objects of reflection, that they can be acknowledged as one's own and thereby lived through. Through its comprehending gaze attentive to the multiplicity of scenes, *Carrie* offers the maturity of modernism as an alternative to the dyad of shame and pride, self-effacement and self-asserting independence. The cinematic gaze at once links the elements of the scene together in a plot (Chris's plot, now supplanting both Sue's plot and the plot Carrie is living) and reminds us that every such plot, every such assertion of mastery through an assembly of elements according to one's will, can be reframed and disassembled, through a mode of

looking which attends to the constructedness of every plot, and which seeks to articulate a way of living in light of that recognition. Carrie's own masterful response, which is to supplant these other plots with a final unifying plot of her own, is marked in its adolescence by the fact that it takes hold in response to the echoing of her mother's shaming words: the assertion of independence always bears the mark of a childhood shame it wishes to prove itself impervious to.

De Palma's film inherits from modernists like Flaubert, Beckett, and Godard the orientation towards *reframing* familiar plots, what I am calling plots of independence and adolescence, plots which affirm the centrality of the meanings human beings give to their lives. In reframing these plots, modernist texts such as these damage this imagined centrality, these plots of independence. But they do so, I argue, not merely by deflating them, but rather by comprehending and thus forgiving them, in a deepening of the self-consciousness that they themselves have begun to work out. Beyond the assertions of independence through the construction of an individual plot, the maturity of modernism acknowledges the narrativity of every construction of the world, and imagines a form of life that can live with this acknowledgement, by taking responsibility for the narratives we commit to as our own.

13. Conclusion: Experience and Identity

It has been the aim of this wide-ranging Conclusion to argue that there is no 'innocence of experience,' and that the modernist works studied in this dissertation, and the philosophy of modern subjectivity that I have drawn from the thought of Merleau-Ponty, offer a more positive and generative approach to going beyond violent and entrapping forms of identity as independence and self-mastery than appeals to an innocence of pre-subjective, non-narrative,

or non-self-conscious ('absorbing') experience.[355] The force that many branches of the theoretical humanities have found in conceptions of depersonalization, disidentification, and non- or pre-subjective experience, I argue, can itself be understood as a reaction against the stultifying forms of identity that prevailing social conditions (not least those of the family, of gender, and of capitalism, evoked through my analyses in this dissertation) continue to impose. While a Sartrean ethics of freedom and a poststructuralist concern for the non-discursive, the non-rational, and (in at least some of that tradition) the non-subjective are clearly distinct, I argue that they share a basic valorisation of the *flight from identity*. As I have argued throughout, however, this flight from identity can only be comprehended as a moment in a process of revaluing and redetermining identity, since *someone* is the subject of this flight, and in taking oneself to be such a negative subject of refusal, one already articulates for oneself the minimal positive content of an identity, a way of being in the world which one recognises as one's own.

Sartre himself reminds us of this in the exchange from *Les mains sales* used as the epigraph to this dissertation, showing the *forgetting of the self* to be the activity of *oneself*.

> HUGO. Je suis dans le Parti pour m'oublier.
> HOEDERER. Et tu te rappelles à chaque minute qu'il faut que tu t'oublies.[356]

Hugo wishes to vanquish his bourgeois identity as an 'I,' as a man with a certain history, certain interests, abilities and limitations, by taking up a 'total' perspective or worldview as a

[355] Nietzsche himself offers resources for such a dialectical approach to the question of self-consciousness, with his often ambiguous evocations of a "second innocence" to be brought about by the coming of the Antichrist (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 71; 76). Nietzsche is ambivalent about the advent of self-consciousness he identifies with the men of *ressentiment*; while writhing at their perversity and weakness, he admires them for making of humanity "an *interesting animal*," precisely by causing us to question and to loathe our own animality (*Genealogy*, 18). The overcoming of the divided state he locates in the attitude of *ressentiment* and the Judaeo-Christian tradition will not simply revert to that idyllic state of contented, self-affirming life he associates with nobility, but will, Nietzsche seems to suggest, unite ('modern') self-consciousness with the ('ancient') acknowledgement of our boundedness to life.
[356] Sartre, *Les mains sales* (Gallimard, 1948), 109.

communist militant whose life is an instrument of historical progress and human liberation. While it might be said that Hugo is simply replacing an 'I' identity with a 'We' identity, this is not so straightforwardly the case; for it is not the feeling of belonging to a righteous or superior group (that of communist party members) that enables Hugo's zeal, but, more fundamentally, the feeling that he is carrying out the work of history, acting according to an objective necessity justified by a science that eliminates questions of subjectivity. Hoederer, the party leader now seen as a traitor to the cause by Hugo's faction, reminds Hugo that this desire to align himself with history and obliterate his presence to his own actions is, inasmuch as it is a desire, something Hugo himself *is doing*, *as Hugo*. Hugo thinks he has attained the one truly grounded worldview, so grounded that it doesn't suffer from the limitations and contestation of an identity, because it is not merely a true view held by some people, but is the view of truth itself, or truth looking at itself, with no distinct 'I' who is doing the looking. It is this fantasy of having done with oneself by attaining a true worldview that Hoederer punctures in his response to Hugo.

In Sartre's philosophy, as discussed above in Chapter Two, we find an inescapable and irresolvable back-and-forth between these two moments, exemplified here by Hugo and Hoederer respectively, of negation and facticity, the for-itself's assertion of its negative freedom and the reciprocal, alienating reassertion of one's status as an in-itself. Merleau-Ponty, in the Preface to *Signs* discussed above, raises the same thought about the impossibility of forgetting oneself, but in a way which opens up the dialectical question of how one is to live in light of this recognition that one will always exist in relation to others, will always find oneself playing 'roles' that one did not sign up for. He raises this question in dramatic fashion amid his reflections on Nizan – who may have been the real-life inspiration

for the character of Hugo in Sartre's play – recalling remarks he heard the militant writer make in 1939.[357]

> He says: "We will have war against Germany, but with the U.S.S.R. as an ally, and we shall win it in the end." He says it firmly, serenely (I can still hear his voice), as if he were released from himself at last.
>
> Fifteen days later came the Nazi-Soviet pact, and Nizan left the Communist Party. Not, he explained, because of the pact, which beat Hitler's Western friends at their own game. But the French Party should have saved its dignity, pretending indignation and giving the appearance of declaring its independence. Nizan realized that to be a Communist is not to play a role one has chosen but to be caught in a drama where without knowing it one receives a different role.[358]

There is no innocence in an historical world, and to experience is to relate to oneself and one's world historically, to locate one's present perceptions in relation to past ones and to an intimated future. Equally, to relate to oneself and one's world is to mediate this experience in terms of an identity, a conception of one's own 'place' in the world. These two 'moments,' that of experience and that of its mediation by a subject of this experience, arise together, and are inseparable. The role Nizan wished to play, on Merleau-Ponty's account, was to have saved him from his presence to himself; but history got in the way, and the demands of the role became irreconcilable with the commitments that had brought him to it. With this shock, he realised he had been present to himself the whole time, that the Communist Party's project was a project that lived in him only insofar as he, in his distinctness, continued to affirm it with his own reasons.

The refusal of identity is compelling because it is a resistance to power, to the power of homogenisation and control. Walter Benjamin writes of his childhood that he

> was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself. This would happen at the photographer's studio. Wherever I looked, I saw myself surrounded by folding screens, cushions, and pedestals which craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal.[359]

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[357] W.D. Redfern, *Paul Nizan: Committed Literature in a Conspiratorial World* (Princeton University Press, 1972), 203-4; Michael Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 64.
[358] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 31.
[359] Walter Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood Around 1900," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2002), 391.

Alienating forms of power demand that we be identical with ourselves, that we be *identifiable*, that our identity papers be in order, that we look like our photograph – the better to make us objects of knowledge and control, as predictable, identifiable units. This process of identification is also one that we can 'freely' administer to ourselves in ways that subject us all the more to power, as theorists from Adorno to Foucault have shown, and as contemporary phenomena like social media make all the more apparent. An essential modern response to this alienating demand for identity has been its refusal, the refusal to be *identical with oneself*: and to Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" and Benjamin's retreat from the photographer's gaze, we may here add Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" Every coming-of-age must grant itself the right of self-contradiction, the right not to be 'like oneself,' not to be *like* one's assigned image, not to heed the stern and reasonable call to identify, which every adolescent learns is a call to obey.

Such a refusal of the demand to identify is vital; but its force needs to be resituated. It is a refusal of *alien* forms of power, forms of power that are alien to us and imposed upon us for alien ends. Even when we ourselves perform these practices of producing static images of ourselves and designating them our identity, we are relating in an alienated fashion to ourselves; as we saw in Chapter One, *Madame Bovary* is a work replete with examples of such practices of alienating self-identification. But if we want non-alienating institutions, non-alienating collective practices, then we must want new ways to identify by virtue of our participation in these institutions and practices; if, on the other hand, we believe power and institutions to be inherently alienating, then we have given up on the project of social change. Alienation, here, means that the social practices we are compelled to participate in do not value our life. The flight into static images of oneself, even when 'freely' chosen, is an

alienating activity because it turns us against our own life, which is temporal, open to change and loss, open to others. If we are to develop social practices and institutions which acknowledge and value our life, this can only entail developing ways of identifying with these institutions and practices, seeing the identities we take on as meaningfully expressed through our participation in them. Such identification is radically transformed from the hollow and alien forms of identity which the modernist tradition explored in this dissertation reacts against and seeks a way beyond: it is transformed because it is an identification *with* our life, and not in opposition to life.

Within the lifeworld of modernity and many of the theoretical forms it has produced, identity has been opposed to life: it has been that which must be fled in order to live freely, like the flight from rural life to the anonymity of cities; and it has been that which has trapped human beings in pale images of themselves, in fantasies of placing themselves above or outside the world, clinging to an identity in flight from a life that seems unlivable. The full promise of modernity, which I have sought to give voice to in this dissertation, is the overcoming of this opposition: the acknowledgement of every identity as a *living practice*, and every living practice as a working-out, a placing, a displacing, and a re-placing, of identity.

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