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## **Sublime Evil: The Immoral Writers' Celebration of Life**

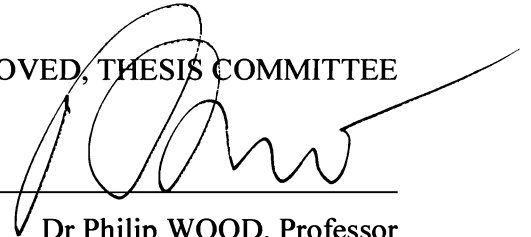
By

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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**Sublime Evil, The Immoral Writers' Celebration of  
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A Study of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Jean Genet,  
Vladimir Nabokov, William Burroughs and Michel Houellebecq.

By Neli Koleva

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the problematic relationship between ethics and aesthetics as reflected in the works of six highly controversial French and American authors of the Twentieth century. The study sets out to investigate the possible reasons why we keep on reading, cherishing and rejoicing in the works of writers who present us with an extremely unsettling ethical situation. Using the notion of Sublime Evil as it plays out in the works of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Jean Genet, Vladimir Nabokov, William Burroughs and Michel Houellebecq, I explore the mechanism through which works of literature, thoroughly reprehensible from the point of view of conventional morality, prove to be compelling and irresistible. By analyzing at length the escape vaults of love, religion, art, ideology, drugs anti-social behavior such as Nazism, anti-Semitism, pedophilia, prostitution, homicide and theft, in the seven novels, I demonstrate that ultimate dejection ends up paradoxically and inextricably bound with supreme aesthetic beauty,

## Acknowledgements

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Last but not least, I'd like to thank my family, my parents and my brother. While they don't know much about French literature, they never doubted I did ... And very often, that's all I needed to hear.

Neli Koleva

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# Anything, absolutely anything

Quietly, something enormous has happened in the reality of Western man:  
a destruction of all authority, a radical disillusionment in overconfident reason,  
and a dissolution of bonds have made anything, absolutely anything seem possible.

Karl Jaspers, 1935

## I.

In a way, this study started a number of years ago. It was provoked by a personal challenge. As a teenager in Bulgaria in the 1990s, I was a voracious reader. Communism had just come to an end. Books in English were few and far between. Great works of literature, particularly contemporary ones, had only recently begun to be translated into Bulgarian. At the time, my high-school friends and myself swore by the Beat Generation. We exchanged every novel we could get our hands on. In the course of one such swap I must have come across Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. I could not have been older than 15. I vividly remember being completely overwhelmed by the book, reading and re-reading it with a mixture of pleasure and horror I had hitherto never experienced. I could not stop talking about it. Yet at every attempt to describe what the book was about, or even recommend it to someone, I was struck by the complete inadequacy of my own explanations. I simply could not carry the point across. If anything, I was doing the book a disservice! Even though I lacked formal background in literary studies, I had read

sufficiently to know how to recognize and sum up what appeared to be important or striking about a work of literature. After all, even though *War and Peace* is radically different from *The Sun Also Rises*, even a fifteen-year-old can tell you what both of them are about and what makes them extraordinary. This, as I quickly got to understand, is far from being the case with a novel like *Naked Lunch*.

Where do we even begin to make sense of a novel like *Naked Lunch*? Suppose we tried to summarize the plot, for, surely, this would be the least challenging of possible exercises. It would most probably go something like this: *Naked Lunch* narrates the adventures of William Lee (aka Lee the Agent). It starts in the US, where he, a heroin addict, is fleeing the police “looking for an angry fix” (to use Allen Ginsberg’s immortal adage which, for many, has come to epitomize the 1950s). Eventually, he winds up in Mexico, where he is assigned to one Dr. Benway. Dr Benway is not a doctor. It is unclear why, but he lives in an imagined country called Anexia and works as “Total Demoralizer”. Further in the novel, we follow Lee to an imaginary state called Freeland. This is a kind of limbo, controlled by Islam Inc, etc. I very much doubt that this resume would entice many potential readers. And what of the ethical aspects of the novel? How do we go about narrating the hallucinatory trips of an addict and justifying that, inasmuch as they constitute a work of art, they are also powerful and beautiful? Consider, for example, the reaction of people like well-educated and well-read parents. Their exposure to Anglophone books ended, due to the specificity of the regime they lived in, with *The Great Gatsby*. How could they possibly be thrilled to find out that I was passionate about a book detailing some addict’s deranged hallucinations and nauseating physical degeneration? Try as I did, I was not any more successful in telling

them what made *Naked Lunch* the extraordinary novel that, on a visceral level, I felt it was, than I was describing the ways in which it changed my perception of literature forever.

As time went by, I discovered other books which puzzled me in the way in which, many years ago, *Naked Lunch* had first started me thinking. What struck me in my initial encounter with Burroughs' novel was how ill-prepared we are, as readers, to reflect upon an "immoral", disturbing, yet tremendously powerful novel. Conscious efforts to reduce *Naked Lunch*, or any of the novels which constitute the object of this study, to a brief, succinct and powerful summary, and explain to others the magic they exercise over me have consistently ended in failure. The question this study sets out to answer is, then, why do we keep on reading, cherishing and rejoicing in the works of writers who present us with an extremely problematic ethical situation. And what is there, in works of literature thoroughly reprehensible from the point of view of conventional morality, which is nonetheless compelling and irresistible?

It took no small amount of rumination and observation before I was able to shortlist the authors and novels the present study deals with. Each of them was chosen because it incarnates a particular and noteworthy offense against conventional morality. Let us consider them briefly and in chronological order. Louis-Ferdinand Céline was an eloquent misanthrope who painted a grim and despairing portrait of man in his 1932 book, *Voyage Au Bout de la Nuit*. His narrator, Bardamu, undertakes a Candide-like journey<sup>1</sup> around the world. Though the scenery changes, human stupidity, violence and baseness remain virtually unaltered. Vehemently and unapologetically, Bardamu's

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<sup>1</sup> The parallel was established in Michel Beaujour's "Céline, artiste du laid", op.cit.



narrative communicates his disgust and disillusionment with his fellow man. What's ultimately even more disconcerting about Céline's book is that, one can successfully argue, many of the observations, which show, as the writer himself pointed out on the first pages of the novel, to what extent men resemble beasts, remain true today as well.

A contemporary of Bardamu's, Drieu la Rochelle's Gilles is an attractive villain who, wounded at the front, returns home and puts his masculine charms to use. Having successfully seduced and abandoned a rich heiress, he starts moving in the literary and political circles of the 1920s, aspiring to become a writer. Gilles appears cold, calculating, cruel and completely amoral. Still, throughout the book, he is also strikingly lucid about the motivation behind and the impact of his actions. As the narrative unfolds, we become increasingly aware that all he does stems from his desire to flee the mediocrity of everyday existence which everybody around him leads. His main motivation is upsetting a stifling and oppressive *status quo*. At times, he is even paradoxically praying that his baseness be debunked by a brave individual who might take it upon himself to show his true colors to the world. For all his pro-Fascist and strikingly anti-Semitic tendencies, Gilles is an Everyman of sorts. He is an emotional, sensitive, sincere, intelligent person who is the product of a whole system against which he fights and which ultimately destroys him. As lazy, debauched, unscrupulous as he appears to be at times, Drieu's protagonist is nonetheless a compelling individual. In his struggles against a purposelessness, he exhibits character traits everybody can identify with. Drieu's novel is also significant because it introduces another theme which most of the novels we will be considering share. Life in society such as it is lived by most people is unbearable for him, so finding an alternative to it becomes a matter of primary

importance. The bleak narrative of phony Parisian mores and trivial incidents is skillfully juxtaposed with the sincere emotion, sense of belonging, camaraderie and pure joy Gilles experiences when, having returned to the front after a long convalescence in Paris he feels once again the chilling presence of danger and death. Gilles the villain, the *coureur de dots*, the *parvenu*, inhales the exhilarating air of the battlefield and with him, the reader also breathes deeper, sharing the happiness of the person who has managed to escape the predicament of a contingent existence. In the chapters which follow, we will be exploring in detail how a similar move is executed by the rest of the authors who interest us.

Both Céline and Drieu's novels stage their protagonists against the backdrop of World War One. This is only logical as both writers fought in it and returned from the front injured. Thus, the position of their protagonists is in many ways their own. Much as we sense, especially in Céline, a certain indignation provoked by the senseless annihilation of human life the war brings about, it is not depicted exclusively as a negative occurrence. Bardamu and Gilles – and, I'd like to suggest - their creators, never fully recovered from a disillusionment, which set in after their discharge from the front. The reader is instructed that, senseless and horrible as the carnage of the war might have been, civil life is even more desperate, and the average people real monsters. At least in war, Céline and Drieu seem to be suggesting, there is a possibility of real heroism, of going above and beyond the constraints of everyday existence which both of them viewed as infernal.

As is the case in a number of European literary works from the 1920s and the 1930s, the war has left indelible impressions in both protagonists' psyches. Thus, it is

even more noteworthy that two books which appear in 1940s would make virtually no reference to either one of the World Wars. *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, Jean Genet's first novel, and *Miracle de la rose* (published in 1942 and 1946, respectively) depict, in depth, a curious Montmartre subculture, populated by crooks, thieves, assassins, homosexual transgender prostitutes. The narratives also take us behind the walls of a state penitentiary where a death row inmate is worshipped like a god by his fellow prisoners. In Genet's novels, crime is as ubiquitous as treason and sexual deviation. Even more shocking than the subject matter is the beautiful, classical language of the narration. It constitutes a veritable poetic celebration of all that is evil and ugly. Genet's novels penetrate the reader, their prose style so exquisite that one rejoices even in the most disturbing of scenes. Grotesque and magnificent, they are the more troubling because they seduce the reader. Owing to the particularities of his language, Genet is also most effective in transporting us to a realm where we are no longer concerned with what is considered appropriate or noteworthy in the quotidian, and are free to experience the artwork on its own terms.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, published in 1955, is perhaps the best-known work on this list of "immoral" novels. Its narrator, Humbert Humbert, is a murderer with a "fancy prose style"(as per his own description). The sophistication of his expressions is the only one which can rival Genet's idiosyncratic style. Humbert relates the story of an abominable crime. For nearly four years, he has been sexually and psychologically raping and abusing his late wife's pre-pubescent daughter. Despite the horror of the transgression, which the reader rightfully condemns, the beautifully devious way in which his love and suffering are narrated remain unquestionably compelling. *Lolita* is a

book in which languor, anguish, fervor and passion alternate in the best romantic tradition.

*Lolita* came out in the mid-fifties and is considered one of the greatest novels in the English language. Curiously, though, Dolores Haze, all-American teenage girl, did not see the light of day in the country in which she was “conceived”, but in Paris. Four leading editors turned the book down before Maurice Girordias, owner of a publishing house of a highly dubious reputation, brought it out. *Lolita* was bound in the obligatory drab-green covers which signaled Olympia Press’ pornographic books. For years after *Lolita*’s appearance, locked in a legal battle with the author, Girordias would insist that he had been led to publish the book because he sincerely appreciated Nabokov’s innovative genius. The truth is infinitely more prosaic. Hurricane *Lolita*, as the novel would come to be known, swept both sides of the Atlantic. However, if it came to be published at all, it is because it catered to those who hungered for the graphic, explicit and scandalous.

Maurice Girordias has been vilified by generations of Nabokov critics. Incidentally, he was likewise William Burroughs’ French publisher.<sup>2</sup> *Naked Lunch* came

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<sup>2</sup> For all its dubious reputation, Olympia Press and Maurice Girordias deserve a place in any serious appraisal of the literary history of the 1950s. It provided a score of struggling artists with their livelihood. For example, The South African poet Sinclair Beiles was an editor at the publisher. In addition to *Lolita* and *Naked Lunch*, several other important works of art saw the light of day there: J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1955); the French trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953) by Samuel Beckett; *A Tale of Satisfied Desire* by Georges Bataille; *Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Réage. Paris as we have come to picture it in the 1950s - a bustling literary metropolis, mecca of avant-garde literature, would have been impossible without Girordias. For further information, see Patrick Kearney’s *The Paris Olympia Press*, Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008

out in 1959. As we have had occasion to point out, it presents a particularly poignant example of the phenomenon which interests us. This novel traces the wanderings of a drug addict looking for a fix. All the characters are grotesque. Their humanity is distorted, their will is controlled by some kind of addiction. Curiously, it depicts a world not unlike that of Genet's Montmartre. While in *Notre Dame* and *Miracle*, the driving forces appear to be money and sex (all crimes are committed in their names), in Burroughs those two are replaced by drugs and the obsession with being in total control. *Naked Lunch* recounts, in a delirious daze, the wretched existence of beings, completely stripped of humanity by those two uncontrollable and insurmountable forces. The novel also abounds in nauseating descriptions of shriveled, atrophied bodies, driven to insanity by deprivation. Nonetheless, Burroughs treated his novel as a factual and not a figurative account: "*Naked Lunch* treats a health problem, it is [therefore] necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting. Sickness is often repulsive and its details - not for weak stomachs" (*NL*: xii). It seems to me that, on some level, this appraisal can be applied to each one of the novels we will discuss here. They, too, explore in detail an existential sickness and search for an alternative to it.

A final word of explanation concerns the last novel under scrutiny in this study, Michel Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une Ile*. Published in 2005, it appears several decades after the works previously discussed. I have nonetheless chosen to include it, because it seems a successful illustration of how similar concerns evolve in subsequent decades. Houellebecq's novel is a complex book in which elements of hagiography, science-fiction and eschatological mysticism are woven into the life stories of an aging comedian of some notoriety. It presents a curious study of the phenomenon which

interests us here. Abounding in misanthropy and obscenity, it spells out a sinister omen of the end of humanity such as we know it and its replacement by a new race of immortal and asexual clones and their inhuman religion. The narrator, whose life we follow, is the offspring of a generation whose value systems have been destroyed by the very phenomena underscored in the novels by the previous five authors. It also depicts a reality, which, by virtue of its chronological proximity to our own day and age, is easier to recognize and identify with. Two generations after Céline, Drieu, Genet, Nabokov and Burroughs, the insatiable quest for newer and more powerful “kicks”, the sexual liberation, the circulation of hallucinogenic drugs and the advance of new pseudo-religious teachings has brought about the destruction of humanity. In his powerful novel, Houellebecq has no didactic intentions. Instead, the destabilizing, horrifying and gruesome aspects of everyday life the narration relates unwittingly lure the reader into a space where conventional categories of right and wrong dissolve, and one is invited to consider ways in which one can redeem and celebrate existence.

## II.

The debate on the aesthetic merits of literature versus its moral implications is, of course, what lies at the heart of this study. Let us remind ourselves, from the outset, that this antagonism, which essentially boils down to the ways in which we define art and identify its role in a larger human context, is as old as art itself. It has, incidentally, never been particularly fruitful. As Casey Haskins points out in his article “Paradoxes of Autonomy; or, Why Won't the Problem of Artistic Justification Go Away?”

[d]ebates about art, as the past century made clear, have a way of inheriting all the politicized stubbornness and more than a little of the substance of our culture's older quarrels over morality and religion. Thus one might think that prudent critics would long ago have given up trying to say large, true things about the impossible topic of artistic value. Yet interestingly, they have not.”<sup>3</sup>

In the course of my research, I was likewise struck by the relative scarcity of reflection upon what strikes me as most important for this project: the paradoxical mechanism which renders profoundly disturbing works of art veritable celebrations of existence.

Misanthropy, Nazism, anti-Semitism, pedophilia, prostitution, homicide, theft, drug addiction - the novels in this study constitute a veritable panoply of criminal deviation, wretchedness and horror, depicted in a powerful, mesmerizing language. Before we consider these deviations individually and dwell on the specific ways in which abominable crime and dejection are paradoxically and inextricably bound with supreme

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<sup>3</sup> Haskins, Casey, op.cit, 1

aesthetic beauty, let us briefly mention here the characteristics the novels we will be dealing with have in common. The most ostensible shared feature is, of course, that all of them have, at the moment of their publication and frequently for some time after it, been referred to as scandalous works of art. Or, to use a term much *en vogue* in the last decades, they constitute examples of a type of literature one could qualify as transgressive. And, since **transgression** is one of the most loaded terms of Twentieth-century literary criticism (Ducrot and Todorov announce, in their *Dictionnaire des sciences du langage*, that text "has always functioned as a transgressive field with respect to the system according to which we organize our perception, our grammar, our metaphysics and even our science"<sup>4</sup>) it would be wise to spell out the particularities and parameters of transgression such as I see them in the present study.<sup>5</sup>

First and foremost, we are dealing here with books which extol a type of behavior or a value system (drug addiction, homosexuality, Nazism etc) very much at odds with conventional morality. Nonetheless, the morally problematic choices around which the narrative revolves are represented as acts which require no further justification. Similarly, neither the protagonists nor the narrators (with the possible exception of Humbert Humbert – and he is mostly apologizing in order to fool the reader, as we shall subsequently have occasion to notice) seem to have any qualms about their respective

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<sup>4</sup> Ducrot and Todorov, 443-44

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Guerlac is right to point out that, "If there is a single term poststructuralism could not live without-at least within the intellectual circles associated with the review *Tel quel* - it is "transgression," inherited from Bataille" (Guerlac, "Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)", op.cit., 6-17) Notable studies in the field which are referred to somewhat less frequently in this context include Bakhtin's analyses on the grotesque and Jack Sargeant's theories in the role of transgression in cinema.



acts and life choices. Even though their actions are utterly reprehensible from the standpoint of conventional ethics, the authors do not appear to look for ways to justify them. I'd like to insist upon this particularity, which renders the works of art which interest us here, particularly groundbreaking. Unlike a score of predecessors, our authors do not appear particularly interested in deliberately upsetting proponents of conventional morality. At least, there is no attempt to shock such as we have learned to recognize it in authors like the Marquis de Sade or Lautréamont or even Baudelaire. A brief parallel between the descriptions of, say, Burroughs' drug addict and Sade's libertine can shed some light over this claim. Everything about the theatricality of a novel like *Justine* or *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* suggests a calculated insult and a well thought out challenge to societal norms the author clearly abhors and sets out to provoke. Such is not the case of *Naked Lunch*, in which the drug addict seems to have neither the desire to plead his right to be who he is nor the impetus to justify his life choices. He simply *is*, and that seems a radically novel – and I'd like to argue, more disturbing - stylistic choice. It suggests a degree of corruption on the level of the society, for, like Lee the Addict, the rest of the narrators are fairly unapologetic about their particular brand of societal offence. The protagonists of the novels may all be guilty in their own way of different offenses against written law, conventional morality, the basic tenets of twentieth-century “humanism “or at least mainstream sensibility. At least on the surface, however, they do not feel particularly interested in advertising it as some sort of deliberate choice. Instead, they seem preoccupied with demonstrating, in the most powerful way possible, that they **belong** among their mainstream contemporaries.

This nonchalant attitude towards individual problematic choices has to do with the novel ways in which our authors have come to define transgression. In order to comprehend this change in attitude, it would be useful to turn here to Michel Foucault's influential essay "Préface à la transgression." In it, he defines the term as "a gesture concerning the limit." Foucault would insist on, above all, the brevity of this gesture. He likens it to a flash of lightning, a sudden brisk illumination which disappears as soon as it enters perception.<sup>6</sup> Foucault's image is largely derived from Heidegger's notion of the ontology of limitation and the coming into being of beings on the horizon of Being. The image of the flash of lightning also suggests a limit, a border which may not be crossed, and which delineates the parameters of the acceptable. It seems to me that it is precisely this notion of limit which is curiously absent from the narrative horizon we are presented with in each one of the works. They appear to be operating from a vantage point which is beyond the narrow interpretation of transgression as a mere venture into hitherto unknown territory.

A second characteristic, common to all the novels under consideration, has to do with the particular type of narrative they exemplify. Reading these novels, we are allowed a glimpse into the lives of extraordinary people. The experience is unlike anything we might experience in real life. What makes it such is a combination of factors. On the one hand, the life choices of the literary characters we will be dealing with are, to put it bluntly, criminal. By following them and partaking in their adventures, we get to experience vicariously what it would be like to find oneself outside the law. At the same time, these novels are all intimist portraits. While reading them, we observe and

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<sup>6</sup> In Guerlac, "Bataille in Theory", 11

contemplate unusual people's lives **as they unfold before us** in their singularity. They are possessed of the perfected narrative form of the artwork itself. Reading these novels, we follow sequential events. However, the singular episodes end up organized into a series of interlocking fragments by the rigorous logic of the narrative.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the experience of the novel reveals itself as diametrically opposite to life as we know and live it on a daily basis. As socially integrated individuals, our quotidian is almost exclusively spent reacting to and evaluating people and circumstances. However, we are rarely in a position to appraise our day-to-day experiences from an outside perspective. As a general rule, it is impossible to predict how events will unfold or what we might do next. Writing

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<sup>7</sup> The opportunity to organize and demonstrate continuum in a series of seemingly disjointed fragments is characteristic of the aesthetic experience, a concept we find at the heart of the present study. As early as 1958, the literary critic Monroe Beardsley spells out, in his *Aesthetics*, the three or four common features which characterize all aesthetic experiences. "Some writers, he claims, have [discovered those] though acute introspection, and [...] each of us can test in his own experience" (Beardsley, 527). These are focus ("an aesthetic experience is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon [its object]"), intensity, and unity, where unity is a matter of coherence and of completeness (Beardsley, 527). Coherence, in turn, is a matter of having elements that are properly connected one to another such that

[o]ne thing leads to another; continuity of development, without gaps or dead spaces, a sense of overall providential pattern of guidance, an orderly cumulation of energy toward a climax, are present to an unusual degree. (Beardsley, 528)

Completeness, by contrast, is a matter having elements that "counterbalance" or "resolve" one another such that the whole stands apart from elements without it:

The impulses and expectations aroused by elements within the experience are felt to be counterbalanced or resolved by other elements within the experience, so that some degree of equilibrium or finality is achieved and enjoyed. The experience detaches itself, and even insulates itself, from the intrusion of alien elements. (Beardsley, 528)

one's life story out allows one to organize events in one's past, see connections between them, and generally make sense of seemingly disjointed phenomena. Such a re-appraisal of existence is impossible in human, non-artistic reality. Life as it is experienced by most people invariably leaves us bewildered, for we are not able to see beyond the immediate experience. This is why so many great storytellers of the Twentieth century have revolutionized literature by creating quasi-biographical and auto-biographical narratives. Those types of narratives mark an important watershed in the manner in which we think about and evaluate experience. The greatest examples of this type of pseudo-biographical narrative is, of course, Proust's magnificent *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927). In the novels which comprise the opus, even the most mundane daily minutiae have been woven into an intricate, sensible continuum. The appearance of this milestone of world literature marks, in a way, the dawning of a new era in thinking and reevaluating art-as-alternative to existence. It also marks the beginning of a long tradition in which individual experiences, and not heroic events or comprehensive appraisals of existence, come to the forefront, and to which everyone of our featured "immoral writers" has made a significant contribution.

Before we go any further, let us pause for a moment and briefly reflect upon the transformations the genre of the biography went through in the first decades of the 1900s. Authors such as Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola had already been writing novels which focused on the lives of a single individual. Books such as *Le Père Goriot*, *Nana*, *Madame Bovary* etc clearly illustrate this point, as do other novels whose title does not contain the name of a single individual but the novel nonetheless focused on one, as in the cases of Julien Sorel in *Le Rouge et le noir* and Frederic Moreau in *L'Education sentimentale*.

However, the Twentieth century brings about something radically new concerning the individual and which is best illustrated by Marcel Proust's novel. The change can be accounted for if we bear in mind that at the dawn of the Twentieth century, the construction of individual bourgeois identity reaches its limit. The changed narratives that present us with the lives of a single individual attest to a radical change in the single individual's mode of subjectivity, brought about by the dissolution of identity rather than the construction of the single individual narrative. Events such as the two world wars, the ever-advancing Capitalist society and the general loss of faith in religion and traditional values are all at the core of this transformation.

Consequently, the epic narrative which aims at giving the readers a full and all-encompassing picture of reality and which has been in existence in pretty much every national literature of the Nineteenth century (Tolstoy, Balzac, Dickens to name but three)<sup>8</sup> was gradually replaced by the narratives, presenting us with the lives of a single individual. If the "scale of the production" is reduced, that is not the case of the intensity of the description. The focus shifts to the artistic representation of a literary protagonist whose experiences are related as accurately and in as much detail as possible. This important shift is caused by two turn-of-the-century phenomena, both of which are crucial

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<sup>8</sup> Narratives of this kind are sometimes bound up with a sense of nation. They aim at discerning and depicting common traits and historical occurrences, which allow one to inscribe oneself within a larger political body of people. They have proven essential to the formation of a sense of national identity. This type of literature belongs, in its many varieties, to the Romantic and realist movements. Several novels from across Europe which successfully illustrate this concept would be, in Finland, Aleksis Kivi's *The Seven Brothers* (1870), in Hungary, Mór Jókai's mesmerizing *An Hungarian Nabob* (1853), in Bulgaria, Ivan Vazov's *Under the Yoke* (1893), in Portugal, José Maria de Eça de Queiroz's novel *The Relic* (1887). These are just four of my personal favorites, to which many more across the continent can be added.

to the understanding of the six authors we will consider. On the one hand, the world has started to change more rapidly due to the increased rate of change in the modes of production so eloquently spelled out by Marx. The fresh discoveries about the nature of societies and human relationships which the new science of cultural anthropology brings about come to modify perceptions and conclusions about existence as it had hitherto been experienced and then transformed into works of art. The dissolution of the patriarchal model, the migration towards urban areas, the alienation of the modes of production, coupled with a heightened awareness that Western civilization is but one type of societal organization, renders the type of grand narrative gesture which was possible in the previous century, dated and inadequate. The amount of self-doubt on the part of the thinking individual increases. One finds oneself in a situation in which one is forced to acknowledge that, ultimately, the only entity that can be known is one human being. Adding studies of the nature of mental illness and Freud's work on the unconscious to that mix reveals that the individual is a much more complex entity than he was previously believed to be. Suddenly, "Man" becomes not just one entity, but a whole universe, governed by his own unfathomable reasoning. The prominence of the genre of the individualized narrative attempts to take all these new developments into account and explore the interplay between them.

At the turn of the Twentieth century, the most powerful and universal pillar of Western thought and civilization – religion, finds itself significantly weakened. The circumstances which bring about this change have been explored in much detail and there is no need to discuss them at this point (however, we will have an opportunity to talk about the importance of Nietzsche to this study at the end of this Introduction). The

dwindling importance of religion leaves the artist – who we have seen dwelling on the construction of man-as-universe - free to claim a position which had henceforth been exclusively reserved to God. The narrative which orders fragments of life and endows them with sense, thus demonstrating the subtle ways in which each detail relates to the rest is an activity in which the author **becomes** God. It is fair to say therefore that for the novelists dealt with in this study, religion has become a non-issue. God's place has been usurped by the artist. Even though the protagonists featured in these studies make a variety of ethically problematic choices, there is notable absence of aggression and a lack of desire to demonstrate specifically anti-Christian or anti-religious sentiments. (Genet's novels, which abound in sacrilegious references, furnish the only exception.) The novels present us with a radically different, post-Georges Bataillian sensibility, one in which there is no need to even demonstrate that God and a God-ruled universe have become superfluous. Unlike the deliberate sacrilegious ring of novels such as, say, *L'Histoire de l'oeil*, in which religion is systematically debased and humiliated, the selection of novels we will deal with here clearly demonstrates the ways in which this discourse has definitively been surpassed and rendered irrelevant.

### III.

Let us turn our attention to the novels under scrutiny. The perfunctory glance we've allowed them reveals works which transgress the boundaries of the human and the moral, transcend established ethical codes and transport us into a space in which we are free to experience horror, abomination and crime and rejoice in it. It is hard to deny that, for all their nauseating content, *Journey to the End of the Night*, *Gilles*, *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, *Miracle de la Rose*, *Lolita* and *Naked Lunch* are great books. They are read with suspended breath, and, in the process, we experience pure joy and aesthetic appreciation. The very fact that these novels continue to be taught, explored, and written about is a clear indication that they have withstood the test of time and have earned their place as great works of art. However, I feel that, at the same time, these works have been significantly misread on at least three levels. I would like to touch upon them briefly here. In a manner of speaking, my study is an attempt to provide further reflection upon literary theories which have failed to explain the relevant literary phenomena in the novels under analysis. It would be wrong to dismiss any of the previous readings altogether, yet it is important to recognize the ways in which they prove insufficient for the understanding of this particular type of literature.

Most contemporary analyses of artwork which is simultaneously aesthetically striking and disturbing on the ethical level tend to evoke the familiar opposition between the utilitarian (or instrumentalist) and the pleasurable (or autonomist). The juxtaposition of the two constitutes one of the biggest debates in aesthetics. Instrumentalism claims that an artwork or artistic practice is valuable because it is related to something other than



itself. It might, for example, promote moral, political, or cognitive ends that have an independent standing apart from art. Autonomism, in contrast, holds that any instrumentality is irrelevant to artistic value as such. It maintains that artworks and their associated experiences are, in effect, ends in themselves and need no further connections to the world. Autonomism is best exemplified by writers in the pragmatist and Marxist traditions such as Herbert Marcuse (*The Aesthetic Dimension*) and Theodore Adorno (*Aesthetic Theory*). Further examples belonging to the pragmatist tradition include Dewey's *Art as Experience* and the work of Monroe Beardsley which will be discussed subsequently. These authors emphasize the distinctive capacity of the artwork. As an object of value, it is capable of accomplishing something not done, or not done the same way, by other kinds of objects. There are further distinctions to be made at the heart of the instrumentalist interpretation and which I would like to touch upon here, without going into too much detail. While the so-called strict autonomism presupposes that artistic value is necessarily a form of intrinsic value and not an instrumental one, the so-called instrumental autonomism permits works of art to be valuable, as works of art, both intrinsically and instrumentally. Consequently, for those upholding a strict autonomist view, the only standpoint which is relevant or "internal" to the evaluation of works of art as such is that of the spectator contemplating their "artistic" or "aesthetic" properties. In contrast, an instrumental autonomist view admits more flexibility into such an assessment (e.g., standpoints which view works as instrumental to knowledge or edification). In this sense instrumental autonomism affords a more inclusive framework for attributing value to works of art.

Of course, neither one of these two opposing points of view is sufficient by itself to analyze any work of art. Likewise, no literary critic has ever exclusively identified themselves as a supporter of just one of the two interpretative options. Similarly, my analysis explores the interplay between those two possibilities and attempts to use them in order to explain the particular fascination the immoral writers' oeuvre holds for us.

Once again, Foucault's "Préface à la transgression" comes in handy, for in it, the author establishes transgression on the level of language as an alternative to the machine of dialectical contradiction. Suzanne Guerlac reminds us that Foucault was attuned to the recent discoveries of structuralism, which had begun to reverse the conventional understanding of relations between the subject and language. Departing from the relatively novel premise that the subject is no longer considered master of his or her language but structured by it, Foucault was in a position to announce that "the gesture of transgression replaces the movement of contradiction by plunging the philosophical experience into language."<sup>9</sup> From this point on, theorists will look at transgression as a way of getting beyond the constraints of a typically Hegelian dialectic. Taking their cue from Foucault, they will begin to identify transgression with language, a move which is also present in the narratives we will be considering. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that, within the realm of language, transgression is viewed as virtually indistinguishable from its dialectical opposite, interdiction. Several decades before Foucault, in *L'Erotisme*, Georges Bataille points out that "To give transgression to philosophy as a foundation . . . this is what my thinking undertakes . . . [la demarche de

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, 767

ma pensee.]”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the book, he insists that transgression and interdiction are intimately bound up with one another:

The inner experience of eroticism requires of the one undergoing it a no less great sensitivity toward the anxiety that establishes the prohibition than toward the desire that leads to its transgression. It is the religious sensitivity that continuously connects desire and terror, intense pleasure and anxiety, with one another.<sup>11</sup>

What’s more, the term "transgression," which Bataille used to characterize eroticism, came to stand for a gesture of subversion. The latter was, in turn, associated with the crossing of boundaries in philosophy, poetry, laughter and sacrifice.

Bataille insists that transgression and interdiction are concepts which remain strictly subjective. According to him, affective experiences of attraction and repulsion remain the only objective correlation which can be used to distinguish the realms of the sacred and the profane. The experience of seduction, for example, as represented by this special dance that moves us toward the sacred object and the feeling of horror that repels us from it are closely interrelated. It is, I would like to suggest, a similar mechanism that we see employed.

Furthermore, the novels we will analyze in the course of the present study have often been represented as works of literature in which the writers, as well as the readers, have been permitted to **act out** a fantasy and safely indulge in a criminal obsession. Artists and their “deviations” from social norms have for decades been not just tolerated,

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<sup>10</sup> Bataille, *L’Erotisme*, op.cit, 275

<sup>11</sup> Bataille, *L’Erotisme*, op.cit., 35

but indeed celebrated in our society. Yet attributing the disturbing content of these books to their creator's simply being "artistic and different" is equivalent to dismissing them as irrelevant to everyday existence. I would like to argue on the contrary that these works of literature present a meticulous, truthful observation not of deviation, but of a standard reality which is present in every day and age.

My last reservation with regard to the manner in which these artworks have been reviewed is closely linked to the previous one. In addition to the deviation attributed to "artists", analysis of the authors in question tends to over-emphasize the "transgressive" dimension of their novels. I feel that the constant insistence upon the rebellious, original, shocking and transgressive aspect of the artworks has somehow allowed us to gloss over what really is at stake in these books.

It seems almost as though, in order to spare ourselves a profound exploration of the depravity of the human condition described, we place too much importance on the extraordinary and refuse to see how much the bizarre fictional characters resemble common people. I'd like to argue that the most disturbing aspect of Jean Genet's novels lies in the alarmingly familiar behavior and personality traits the "tantes", transgendered men, thieves and assassins who populate them exhibit and not in their sexual inversion and illicit activities. After all, excessive vanity, pettiness, envy, jealousy, and desire to dominate and satisfy one's basest desires at someone else's expense are vices the average person is guilty of no less than Genet's Montmartre denizens.

Every century has had its great rebels, so much so that in popular rhetoric, we tend to draw a parallel between the visionary and the revolutionary. I cannot deny that that these six writers have, for better or for worse, earned the status of *bona fide* literary

mutineers. However, they have not been led by the same impetus which prompted, say, the Surrealists to go to great lengths and offend mainstream sensibilities. The Surrealists were interested in arriving at a clean break. Hence, they crafted elaborate diabolical works which meticulously challenged each aspect of existence. It's hard to say with certainty what exactly inspired the six authors. In the early fifties, Nabokov, for one, thoroughly enjoyed telling his Cornell colleagues that he was writing the book which would get him kicked out of the US. I nonetheless strongly suspect that he, as well as the other five, were not as concerned with the shocking value of their books as they were with relating universal truths about the human condition and arriving at a coherent depiction of existence. Whether one deems this a valid enterprise or not, it seems to me that it would be more appropriate to think of the revolutionary aspects of these novels in terms, similar to Albert Camus' interpretation of the role of the rebel. In his eponymous essay, the existentialist thinker would claim, speaking of Friedrich Nietzsche, that the latter did not craft a philosophy of rebellion but rather, looked for ways to **embody** it. Having already detected that God had become a meaningless concept for his contemporaries, Nietzsche feared that, unless controlled and directed, this godlessness would ultimately end in apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> This is why his writing was directed at making sense of a world in which God is dead. Any other attitude, be it complacency, regret, denial or the philosopher's *bete noire*, cruel mediocrity, meant refusal to confront an urgent existential situation. Similarly, these particular writers have made a conscious choice to create art which deliberately goes against the grain and offends mainstream

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<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth account of Camus' reading of Nietzsche, see "Metaphysical Rebellion" in *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower.

sensibilities in order to make sense of a state of affairs already in place. Their insights are impressive when they concern ordinary and not extraordinary people and situations. Hence, I would like to insist that the “immoral” writers’ greatest achievement lies not so much in the “transgressive” aspect of their writing, but instead in their ability to render the oppressive, sordid and ghastly quotidian aesthetically beautiful and to elevate it to the rank of the work of art. Through the power of their artistic craft, they are able to seduce the reader and compel him to confront facets of existence he has hitherto refused to consider and experience. After all, all of us dream about experiencing something extraordinary. The highly idiosyncratic writing styles of the novels under investigation transform even the most wretched and desperate aspects of human reality into an aesthetic celebration. Thus, they affirm that life, as vile and revolting as it may appear, is always worth living.

## VI.

The most serious challenge in this introductory attempt at spelling out the philosophical underpinnings of the present literary analysis is, it seems to me, determining exactly where to begin. What's more, it is important to recognize that understanding the work of these particular novelists necessarily takes into account a number of pre-existing literary, sociological and philosophical phenomena. Novels have, to quote Tolstoy, always been examples of art which constitutes "a means of communication and therefore of progress. They bear testimony of the movement of humanity forward towards perfection ... (A)rt renders accessible to men of the latest generations all the feelings experienced by their predecessors and also those felt by their best and foremost contemporaries."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is important to begin by revisiting questions, which seem to have been around forever. Experiencing elation, pure joy and exhilaration by partaking (be it actively, or passively – as a reader) in actions that provoke horror and disgust, is by no means a novel or unusual practice. For example, many societies have had elaborate rites, constructed around the ritual torturing of a select victim. This scapegoat was an individual, paraded in front of the whole village and subjected to abuse and humiliation. The ritual served to cleanse and atone for the sins committed throughout the year, as well as demonstrate humility before the gods. In the process, both the victim and the tormentors ascended to a state of purification and bliss. Christianity may be said to be founded upon such a ritual – the "crucifixion" of the "Savior." René Girard's book *La Violence et le sacré* explores the scapegoat ritual in detail and demonstrates the stages through which this extraordinary

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<sup>13</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, *op. cit.* chapter xvi.

state of celebration of life is achieved. Similarly, classical Greek tragedy exaggerates the terrifying aspects of existence by focusing on elements which undermine the natural progression and order of life. The tragedy exploits the same redemptive mechanism which, prompted by the compelling depiction of reprehensible behavior, nonetheless manages to evoke aesthetic bliss. This very link between extreme suffering of the “action” and great bliss at the level of the spectator, a seemingly paradoxical relationship, is essential to the understanding of the ways in which the works of ‘immoral authors’ are capable of overwhelming us with a feeling of bliss and force us to accept and embrace life on its own terms rather than those we promote as ethical imperatives.

It seems, then, that the question here for us is the tension between the ethical and the aesthetic which we find at the core of each one of the novels. The difficulties in fleshing out this opposition commence as early as the level of the appellation. What exactly is the phenomenon we call the aesthetic? It cannot be named easily, it is not a thing or an object, and does not have an object. It surpasses conventional human categorization. It cannot, to quote Boileau, “be proven or demonstrated.”<sup>14</sup> Boileau and Kant refers to the closely related albeit not identical notion of the “Sublime.” This notion, which is even more problematic to pin down than the merely beautiful, proves very useful for this study.<sup>15</sup> According to the authors being reviewed, it is something inherent

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<sup>14</sup> In 1674, Nicolas Boileau translated into French Longinus’ treatise *On the Sublime*, accompanied by the first edition of his own *Art poetique*. He is generally credited with introducing the concept into the common discourse of his contemporaries. For more information on the early propagation of the theories of the Sublime, see Anne T. Delehanty’s article “From Judgment to Sentiment: Changing Theories of the Sublime, 1674-1710”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 2005 66(2): 151-172

<sup>15</sup> In the preface to her excellent book *The Impersonal Sublime*, Suzanne Guerlac attempts to define the ecstatic, the beside-itself dimension of the work of art. She states it is that which “moves the beholder from an



in **human nature** which perhaps perpetrates the contradiction. “In human nature praiseworthy qualities are never found without degenerate varieties in infinitely descending shadings”, Kant writes. “As we move from the aesthetic to the moral, however, this reciprocal relation between beauty and sublimity (or natural and spiritual life) becomes peculiarly “entangled”<sup>16</sup>. The sentiment we experience while reading one of the works in this study operates, I would like to argue, at the limit of the aesthetic (in the narrow sense of an esthetics of beauty) and of the ethical (or political). It carries a critical force, which has both enhanced and challenged the space of the narrowly esthetic<sup>17</sup>.

Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* constitutes the outline of the first coherent modern aesthetic theory and, as such, is instrumental to our study. It also provides us with the most appropriate point of departure for our analysis. Overturning the work of Wolff and Baumgarten, for whom aesthetics was subordinate to the masculine rigor of logic, Kant relocates the discipline of aesthetics at the heart of philosophical thinking.<sup>18</sup> The Kantian

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ontic to an ontological realm” (Guerlac, 4). Guerlac’s reading of Kant’s theory of the sublime can be used to explain the contradiction between the ethical and the esthetic which characterizes the works we will consider.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, p 213.

<sup>17</sup> Guerlac, “The Sublime in Theory”: 905

<sup>18</sup> In his article “Aesthetic Instrumentalism” (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 22 (Autumn 1982), p. 340, T.J. Diffey goes as far as to suggest that Kant was “the first Autonomist”. However, as Casey Haskins points out, qualifying the philosopher as an “autonomist” is problematic inasmuch as he himself never speaks of taste as autonomous. Likewise, in the *Third Critique*, Kant never juxtaposes art and the faculties of judgment. If he uses the term *Autonomie*, he does so in its somewhat technical connotation, as the capacity of a mental faculty to legislate for itself by basing judgment on a principle existing *a priori*. The most famous example of this use of the term is Kant’s thesis of the autonomy of the will. Inversely, imagination,

notion of “schoene Kunst” (literally, "beautiful art") suggests that works of art in general are objects which, by design, occasion an aesthetic response in spectators. In order to respond to the work of art, the spectator must be able to identify it as such and not as a natural object or another type of artifact. It is imperative that the artwork be recognized as the product of human intentionality. Subsequently, an aesthetic response will remain strictly subjective. It will be the result of the free play of the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding. Regardless of those, however, the artistic artifact will invariably be characterized by a feeling of pleasure. Moreover, one is free to reflect upon an object without thinking of it as a means to an end external to the object itself. That a work of art can be identified in this special way by a spectator implies a high degree of disinterestedness on the part of the reader / viewer / listener.<sup>19</sup>

The notion of disinterestedness, which was appropriated by, among others, the Romantics and Schopenhauer, is central to Kant's project.<sup>20</sup> Subsequent generations of

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which lacks an *a priori*, cannot therefore be regarded as an autonomous faculty. In its aesthetically productive mode, it engages the reader in a distinctive form of activity, restricted to, as the context makes clear, the production or reception of fine art. Thus, as Haskins points out, if despite Kant's technical restrictions on the use of "autonomy," one wishes to attribute some kind of autonomy thesis to him, it would have to be a thesis about the autonomy of the aesthetic in general, not of art specifically.

<sup>19</sup> Kant's technical phrase for disinterestedness is *fuer sich selbst zweckmassig*, which we can translate here as "purposive for itself"

<sup>20</sup> Though Kant followed the British in applying the term “disinterested” strictly to pleasures, it has more recently migrated to denote a whole theory of attitudes, particularly in the aesthetic-attitude theories that flourished from the early- to mid-Twentieth century. It would be helpful to trace this evolution of this attitude. For Kant, the pleasure involved in a judgment of taste is disinterested because it does not force us to do anything in particular. For him, it is contemplative rather than practical (Kant, *CJ*, 95). Hence, the

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attitude we bear toward the object of this judgment of taste is presumably also not practical. When we judge an object aesthetically we are unconcerned with whether and how it may further our practical aims.

Let us see how two relatively recent aesthetic-attitude theories stemming from this postulate, those of Edward Bullough and Jerome Stolnitz, further develop the Kantian thesis. According to Stolnitz, bearing an aesthetic attitude toward an object is a matter of attending to it both disinterestedly and sympathetically. To attend to it disinterestedly is to have no purpose beyond that of attending to it. To attend to it sympathetically is tantamount to “accepting it on its own terms,” allowing it, and not one’s own preconceptions, to guide one’s attention of it (Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and philosophy of art criticism: A critical introduction*, Houghton Mifflin, 1960, 32–36). The result of such attention is a comparatively richer experience of the object, i.e., an experience taking in comparatively many of the object’s features. Whereas a practical attitude limits and fragments the object of our experience, allowing us to “see only those of its features which are relevant to our purposes,” the aesthetic attitude, by contrast, ‘isolates’ the object and focuses upon it—the ‘look’ of the rocks, the sound of the ocean, the colors in the painting.” (Stolnitz, 35).

Bullough, in turn, prefers to speak of “psychical distance” rather than disinterest. He defines aesthetic appreciation as something achieved by pitting the phenomenon against our actual practical self. Thus, he allows it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends. Bullough insists that such a look is an objective one, “permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the ‘objective features of the experience, and interpreting even our ‘subjective’ affections not as modes of *our* being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon. (Bullough, 298–299; emphasis in original).

Bullough has been criticized for claiming that aesthetic appreciation requires dispassionate detachment. In an attempt to attack his characterization of the aesthetic attitude, later analysts have pointed out that, “when we cry at a tragedy, jump in fear at a horror movie, or lose ourselves in the plot of a complex novel, we cannot be said to be detached, although we may be appreciating the aesthetic qualities of these works to the fullest. Similarly, we can appreciate the aesthetic properties of the fog or storm while fearing the dangers they present” (Goldman, 264). Such a criticism seems to overlook a subtlety of Bullough’s view. While Bullough does hold that aesthetic appreciation requires distance “between our own self and its affections” (Bullough, 298), he does not take this to require that we not undergo affections. In fact, he maintains quite the opposite: It is in undergoing affections that we have affections from which to be distanced. So, for example, the properly distanced spectator of a well-constructed tragedy is not the “over-distanced” spectator who feels no pity or fear, nor the “under-distanced” spectator who feels pity and fear as she would to an actual, present catastrophe, but the spectator who interprets the pity and fear she feels

thinkers will push the theory of the aesthetic experience as a world apart much further. In Schopenhauer, the aesthetic is devoid of all volition or interest, and hence given a metaphysical significance it does not possess in Kant. Likewise, the beautiful object, depicted as belonging to a sphere independent of the realm of utility. It appeals to the Romantics who view it as a site of resistance to the encroachment of the (conceptually bound) kingdom of means and ends.<sup>21</sup> Following this development further, we find the idea of the autonomy of art<sup>22</sup> pursued to its most extreme conclusion in musicology in the theories of Eduard Hanslick. It was likewise appropriated by the poets of *l'art pour l'art*<sup>23</sup>

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“not as modes of [her] being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon” (Bullough 1995, 299). The properly distanced spectator of a tragedy, we might say, understands her fear and pity to be part of what tragedy is about.

<sup>21</sup> Manfred Frank’s book, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, translated by Elizabeth Millán-Zaubert. (Albany : State University of New York Press, 2004), especially lectures 4-9, provides a great general account of the Romantics' reception of Kant's aesthetics, and particularly his exposition of the four modalities of aesthetic experience.

<sup>22</sup> A further challenge the correct interpretation of the term "autonomy" presents us with stems from the fact that the notion has been used in aesthetics in so many different ways since Kant, that it is no longer clear that any one thing is generally meant by it. Goran Hermeren, for example, lists thirteen different connotations of "the autonomy of art." For further reading, see his *Aspects of Aesthetics* (Lund University Press, 1984), chapter IV.

<sup>23</sup> In a bid to better situate all these movements and concepts in the appropriate chronological order, it would be useful to remind ourselves that the first usage of the phrase "art for art's sake" occurs in an 1804 entry of French writer Benjamin Constant’s journal. He reports a dinner conversation with Henry Crabb Robinson over none other than Kant's doctrine of *Zweckmassigkeit ohne Zweck*. (Benjamin Constant, *Journaux Intimes, II* (1804), eds. A. Roulin and C. Roth (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 58. On the influence of Kant and other German writers on the art for art's sake movement see E. M. Wilkinson's and L.A. Willoughby's introduction to Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

such as Gautier and Symbolists such as Mallarmé. The latter two would go on to empty art of the moral content which even the Romantics had accorded it, transforming it into an enclosed sphere of self-reference. The writers central to this study communicate their ideas with the awareness of some hundred and fifty years of exploration of the ways in which the aesthetic comes to shape artistic discourse. However, as this study hopes to demonstrate, they do not attempt to impose a particular, strictly aesthetic outlook on the world in general. The ways in which they incorporate the sense of disinterestedness inherent to aesthetic theory is by introducing a space in which we can experience both the artwork and life on their own terms.

Disinterestedness is a concept, central to the theory of the aesthetic and is crucial in order to understand the authors under consideration since they go to great lengths to dissociate themselves from a mainstream discourse in order to open our minds to the possibility of experiencing a different, more comprehensive and intense form of reality. The other equally helpful concept which contributes to the understanding of the type of literature under scrutiny here addresses the dissociation between that which is beautiful and aesthetically pleasing, and that which produces an effect on us. For centuries, physical perfection had been considered morally superior, evoking a powerful response. However, accounting for the morally uplifting effect of something which is morally ethically reprehensible and characterized by physical imperfection is somewhat trickier. Once again, the concept of the sublime comes in handy. Roughly a century after Boileau's translation of Longinus' text, the publication of another influential text would carry the discussion further. Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) is the first philosophic theory which addresses the

discrepancy between the effect which the purely beautiful (hence the perfectly moral) and the ethically deprived produce upon us. According to Burke, the sense of the beautiful is brought about by objects which are soft and smooth and reassure us rather than terrify us. That which is beautiful arouses pure pleasure, whereas the sublime contains an element of fear mixed with the delight. Burke provides us with a list of objects which provoke this feeling: wild animals, extremely large or tall objects, God, uniform, etc.<sup>24</sup> Burke concludes that the sublime originates in one of our most basic drives – the one toward self-preservation. Thus, he would recognize that the sublime provides with a much more intense and powerful aesthetic experience than the beautiful. The intensity is largely due to the fact that, once the initial fear is surmounted, there is a sense of release which brings overwhelming relief, in which Burke locates the sublime.

Together with disinterestedness, the theories of the sublime constitute a major milestone in the understanding of some of the issues central to the course of the present study. Like them, it constitutes a fascinating, albeit challenging, area of philosophical reflection. It eludes a concrete definition, because it combines matters of personal taste with competing aesthetic theories. Furthermore, while in Burke and Kant the sublime remains essentially rooted in nature – e.g. in phenomena we as humans have little to no control over, in the oeuvre of the “immoral writers” it transposes analogous

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<sup>24</sup> Burke also identifies a number of sublime objects or properties of objects that do not, directly, threaten us, e.g., tall objects, repeated sounds, and darkness. He suggests, however, that these cases may be assimilated to those of directly threatening objects: darkness is frightening not in itself but (indirectly) because it may hide threatening objects and prevent us from protecting ourselves against them (IV 14-15). Similarly, repeated sounds overwhelm our sense organs, thus causing bodily tension akin to fear, which then causes a corresponding mental state of fear (IV 11-12).

circumstances **within** human nature. The equivocal moral and ethical stands we are forced to take into consideration in the works of Céline, Drieu, Nabokov, Burroughs and Genet trigger, I would like to argue, the same mechanism of fear and release that Burke's text alludes to. Combining painful / disturbing and pleasurable / elevating experiences in literature, the sublime is without a doubt a phenomenon of pronouncedly dual nature. At the same time – and I believe therein lies Burke's most significant contribution to this reflection in philosophical aesthetics, if we judge objects to be immediately displeasing because they inspire fear or overwhelm our senses, if their force is such as to arouse our self-preservation instinct, an important question presents itself; Why don't we act in accordance with that self-preservation instinct but, instead, find them pleasing at all? Similarly, if the writings of Genet, Céline, Nabokov etc unsettle us and offend our deepest most heartfelt ethical convictions, why do we continue to appreciate and rejoice in the aesthetic bliss they evoke in us?

Once again, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* provides an excellent point of departure. It separates the beautiful and the sublime along lines, similar to those of Burke's.<sup>25</sup> For

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<sup>25</sup> Kant would, however, introduce a distinction of his own, and insist upon the difference between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime (*CJ*, p. 247). In the dynamic sublime, as per Burke's account, when we encounter an object which overpowers us, we cringe at the possibility of its harming our physical well-being (*CJ*, p. 260). In the mathematical sublime, by contrast, we find some objects to be as if of "absolute size" (*CJ*, e.g., p. 248). As such, these objects are beyond comparison, incommensurate with our abilities to "comprehend" them sensibly as one. Thus we think of them in terms such as "formless" or "crude" and are unable to see them as falling under an already familiar concept. Consequently, we can understand them as unities only as extended; but we are unable sensibly to "comprehend" (add together) all the intuited, extended parts of the object into one "intuition" (*CJ*, pp.251-252). (Kant would then provide a more complex account of this failure, which involves different, interrelated activities of the imagination). In the instance of the mathematical sublime, we do not feel as though our lives are threatened. Instead, we

Kant, as well as for Burke, the feeling of the sublime is a combination of pain and pleasure. Where Kant would disagree with Burke, however, would be in the analysis of the ways in which the sublime ultimately affects the individual. While Burke understands the sublime as a mechanism, operating as a sequence of tension, fear and then release, for Kant, it is a phenomenon characterized by an upward elevation. Furthermore, the philosopher argues that it is always such an overwhelming and disconcerting experience that it cannot be considered pleasurable in itself.<sup>26</sup> What's pleasurable, however, and what careful readers of the novels under analysis here can confirm, is the letting go of our natural tendency towards rationality. In the presence of the sublime, we are lured out of our comfort zone. Our sensible faculties are incapacitated, we abandon control at all cost and embrace our own physical vulnerability. According to Kant, this is a thoroughly liberating and exhilarating prospect,<sup>27</sup> and one which readers of morally problematic works of art would doubtlessly recognize as well. In acknowledging the *failure* of sensible representation, we thwart sensible desires. Let us remind ourselves that the Kantian sublime sets out to explain the "supersensible aspects of nature", and ultimately

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experience a pain and frustration at our own inability to arrive at an interpretation. Kant thus suggests, that our desire to work out the sublime is deeply rooted in our desire for knowledge. For more detailed discussion of Kant's account, see Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, pp. 86-107; Malcolm Budd, "Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Part III: The Sublime in Nature," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 233-250; Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), chap. 4; Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 304-327.

<sup>26</sup> See Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (p. 311) for a formulation of the Kantian version of the problem of the sub- lime in terms of "reflective judgment" (our inability to be pleased "merely" by judging the object).

<sup>27</sup> Kant's explanation for our pleasure in the sublime, as described in this and the next paragraph, is summed up at CJ, pp. 250, 257-259, and 261-262.



allows us to set ends which transcend sensible abilities of our own, human nature. In Kant, nature does violence through its size and might, interferes with existence and thus introduces an imbalance into the harmony which we associate with the merely beautiful or merely just. Thus, the philosopher leads us to see that the true “object” of our feeling of the sublime is not nature, but ourselves, our own rational ideas and ends.

Like many Eighteenth century thinkers, Kant and Burke estimated that the aesthetic experience, provoked by the work of art, is superceded by nature’s ability to evoke a more powerful response.<sup>28</sup> Attitudes would change, and this view would be replaced in the subsequent centuries by the doctrine that art follows laws of its own and is therefore more powerful than anything existing in nature. It would come into fashion only with the teachings of Hegelian-influenced art historians such as Riegl<sup>29</sup> and Wolfflin.

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<sup>28</sup> This attitude will rapidly change in the Nineteenth and especially the Twentieth century.

<sup>29</sup> Famous above all for his insistence that aesthetics be treated in its historical context and his influence on post-structuralism, Alois Riegl attempted to understand the essence of culture in a particular society and time period on the basis of the artifacts it produced. His study *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, published in Vienna in 1901 (translated by R. Winkes, *Late Roman art industry* (Rome, 1985) is particularly illuminative in this respect. Writes Riegl,

All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man's relationship to the world, within and beyond the individual. The plastic *Kunstwollen* regulates man's relationship to the sensibly perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped or colored, just as the poetic *Kunstwollen* expresses the way man wants to imagine them. Man is not only a passive, sensory recipient, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another) that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires. The character of this will is contained in what we call the worldview (again in the broadest sense): in religion, philosophy, science, even statecraft and law (Source, C.S. Wood, Translator, *The Vienna School reader: politics and art historical method in the 1930s*. New York, 2000. 94-95)

One of the most pertinent aspects of the Kantian theory which has direct impact on our study, however, comes to us through Herder's work. Herder opposed the Kantian notions of awe-inspiring, larger-than-life "formlessness" which, to Kant, defined the objects which evoke the Sublime. Herder believed his predecessor to have failed to take into account that objects have been referred to as sublime historically long before Kant (by Burke and Longinus, among others). As examples of such "Sublime" creations, he points out statues, Homeric descriptions of gods and heroes, the Book of Job etc.<sup>30</sup> Thus, according to Herder, Kant is wrong to claim that the objects which occasion the feeling of the sublime must be formless and incomprehensible. Quite on the contrary, and much in keeping with the sentiments of the art works we will be considering in the present study, Herder insists that works of art can be defined as such precisely because they give form to great, potentially incomprehensible things such as death, divinity, fate and infinity.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Herder argues that in (mostly) ignoring art, Kant (along with practically all aesthetic theorists of the eighteenth century) ignores the best evidence about, and the most formative causes of, aesthetic feeling.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Herder, *Werke*, vol. 8, Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1998, p. 876

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 904-908

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 887

opposing views on *Voyage au bout de la nuit* have dominated and persisted throughout the critical discourse since the publication in 1932. The first one views *Voyage* as a book intended to provoke reflection and reaction through a scathing, albeit truthful, portrait of a corrupt and ill society. The opposing “camp” maintains that the evil and malice in the society it depicted were greatly exaggerated.<sup>61</sup> Regardless of what side of the fence one finds oneself on, however, it seems as though critics had a tendency to interpret *Voyage au bout de la nuit* in terms of its relationship to **reality**. Such an interpretation ignores an important aspect of the novel, namely, the ways in which it allows us to transcend

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<sup>61</sup> As every truly original novel, *Voyage* has lent itself to a multitude of critical approaches. All of these somehow fall short of doing it complete justice, but must be mentioned here briefly. Interpreters have turned to Marx’s “Estranged Labour” (1844) for the explanations of Céline’s vision. They have established a parallel between “alienated labor” which may “ estrange man’s own body from him ... his *human* being.” Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” (1843) has been used to explain Céline’s particular brand of anti-Semitism. ... Yet Céline is no Marxist. Others have turned to Freud for an explanation of the author’s view of the human animal. *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) contains provocative views on sexual happiness, religion, communism, and aggression that appear remarkably similar to some views expressed in *Voyage*. Céline himself had much respect for the father of psychoanalysis. “Freud is a great clinical doctor. One of the last I guess of the great clinical school. ... There is a touch of the novelist in Freud ... Enthusiasm is to let yourself go into delirium. Freud certainly did!” Yet Céline is no disciple of Freud’s. Still other interpretative possibilities include an occasional glance towards Darwin (we remember the episodes where the writer attributes the danger of the “yellow” race’s overtaking the “whites” to their having “dominant blood.”) Other parallels can be established with Rabelais, Defoe and Swift (the latter two seem to have influenced the pamphlets), and with Artaud for the theatricality of his expression. Critic Rosemarie Scullion points out that Semiotic, psychoanalytic, Bakhtinian and historicist interpretations have greatly illuminated the aesthetic dimensions of Céline’s writing and highlighted the linkage between purely literary concerns and the broader ideological and political issue his texts present. Authors such as Sollers, Kristeva, Godard, Llambias have all fostered a heightened awareness of the linguistic complexity and destabilizing force of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s narrative. For more information, see Scullion, 23-44

## V.

So far, we have spelled out two of the most important concepts which define this study( : ) disinterestedness and the sublime. However, both belong to the realm of the reflection upon the aesthetic. Let us now attempt to see how the aesthetic and the ethical can be reconciled within the framework of this analysis. We saw that several generations of thinkers, building on Kant-inspired reflections regarding the autonomy of art, explored the attempt to completely dissociate art from morality. Such a point of view would constitute a major problem for the second major philosopher whose work is indispensable to the understanding of the specific challenge inherent in these works, namely Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the proponents of the “art for art’s sake” are guilty of trivializing art.<sup>33</sup> He points out that “art for art’s sake” reminded one of “a worm chasing his own tail,” and, to quote Martha Nussbaum, called instead for “art for life’s sake.”<sup>34</sup> It is in Kant that he would locate the root of the problematic idea of disinterested aesthetic experience. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche mocks the contemporary belief in

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<sup>33</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche devotes a substantial passage to a critique of the Modernism of l'art pour l'art. He sees, in the desire those artists liberate art from morality and hence render it 'purposeless, goal-less, senseless,' nothing short of a menace for the future of humankind. He attempts to counter it with the following series of rhetorical questions: 'What does all art do? Does it not praise? Does it not glorify? Does it not select? Does it not bring to prominence? With all this it strengthens or weakens certain judgments of value ... is this incidental? A coincidence?' (Rampley, 180) Far from occupying a completely autonomous sphere of self-reference, art, in Nietzsche's thought, refers beyond itself to the world. It constitutes the material expression of a certain relation towards the world. As Nietzsche says, 'Art is the great stimulant to life: how could one conceive of it as without purpose, as goal-less, as l'art pour l'art?' (Rampley, 181)

<sup>34</sup> In Kemal, et.al., op. cit., 56

disinterestedness asserting that “If our aestheticians never tire of claiming in Kant's favor, that spellbound by beauty one can even view undraped female statues "without interest", then one can laugh a little at their expense ... in any case Pygmalion was not an "unaesthetic human.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Nietzsche diverges quite markedly from Kant, Schopenhauer,<sup>36</sup> Wagner, Hugo, Hanslick and so forth as regards what constitutes an aesthetic object or work of art.<sup>37</sup> He frequently appeals for a reorientation of aesthetics to include the standpoint of the creator. Such a reorientation would involve, as a consequence, the transformation of the notion of ‘how’ (which constitutes a major preoccupation for philosophers of the aesthetic) and showing ‘what’ art actually is. This change in emphasis would be tantamount to a transition from examining the spectator's

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Rampley, op.cit., 179

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche challenges Schopenhauer's notion of will-less aesthetic experience with the observation that far from displaying no interest in the aesthetic experience, Schopenhauer was greatly interested in it, indeed positively craved it as a release from the blind mechanism of the Will. In Nietzsche's eyes, Schopenhauer's subscription to the idea of a will-less aesthetic experience is self-defeating. He insists that the aesthetic is always invested with a particular function or use value which enmeshes it within the system of means and ends. Nietzsche suggests that this system is part of the economy of desire, which, in turn, is not dissimilar to **Stendhal's idea of an art that contains ‘une promesse de bonheur’.**

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche famously held quite amusing views about his predecessors, and his vitriolic characteristics remind one of Nabokov's categorical dismissals of great luminaries of the past and his contemporaries alike. In the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he would accuse him of possessing the “naïveté of a country parson” when dealing with the question of art. KSA 5, p. 347 (Pappas, op.cit, 165) In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche would call Kant an “idiot” and add that he displayed a “mistaken instinct in everything and anything, the counter-natural as instinct, German decadence as philosophy.” (Rampley, 175) As Matthew Rampley points out, “in his private notes he is no less uncharitable to the great “Chinaman of Königsberg” accusing him of “clumsy pedantry and petty bourgeois manners”, concluding that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is “already the embryonic form of cretinism” (Rampley, p. 271).

experience of the already present and static art work to analyzing the creative activity of the artist and the reasons behind his desire to create the artwork. Nietzsche would argue that the “what” part of the question is addressed only whenever the notion of the will to power is introduced. Indeed, by bringing it up, Nietzsche opens a discourse within which the human being is attempting to construct a meaningful environment within which to live, indeed within which living is rendered possible.

Furthermore, the meaningful environment in Nietzsche’s theory is intrinsically bound with human physiology. It is well known how Nietzsche seeks to outline the extent to which ‘knowing’ (i.e., interpreting) is shaped by the organic processes of the body:<sup>38</sup> “It seems to me that what is generally attributed to the mind characterizes the being of the organic: and in the highest functions of the mind I find merely a sublime type of organic function.”<sup>39</sup> The notebooks of 1887 and 1888, as well as late works such as *Twilight of the Idols* and the essays on Wagner depict pleasure in beautiful objects as a sexual pleasure and demonstrate that artistic creativity is analogous to the process of procreation. “All art ... inflames desire,”<sup>40</sup> he claims, and goes on to state that art

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<sup>38</sup> The interpretative will to power which, according to Nietzsche, renders human existence possible, can be seen functioning at even the lowest level of organic life. As early as the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche discusses the manner in which the plant interprets its environment in order to enhance its own life. Against this background, he would view conscious interpretation as merely a sophisticated variety of this same basic organic interpretative will to power. It is Nietzsche’s conviction that even the most primitive organisms further their life processes with intentional activity: “propagation amongst amoebae seems to be throwing off ballast, a pure advantage. The excretion of useless material. (KSA 12: 10[13], p. 461)

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Rampley, 184

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 182

“reminds us of states of animal vigor; on the one hand it is an excess and outflow of blooming corporeality into the world of pictures and desires; on the other a stimulation of animal functions through pictures of and desire for heightened life.”<sup>41</sup> It is precisely this possibility for a more intense existence the work of art renders possible. This is also something we will observe in every one of the novels in this study – love and the sexual act, the acceptance and fusion which go along are invariably part of the narratives.

This interpretation of the organic is such that we are constantly reminded that art, as a physiological activity, must also be motivated not just by desire, but by interpretative desire for power. Beauty is, quite simply, that which enhances the feeling of power, that which best interprets and organizes the world. While the authors in this study might not necessarily strive towards a mainstream representation of beauty as such, they all share a Nietzschean understanding that art is capable of endowing existence with meaning it otherwise lacks. If we replaced the word “beauty” in its somewhat narrow context in Nietzsche with “art” in general – and here I mean especially the type of morally problematic art that our writers engage in – we could see how art renders life meaningful on its own terms. In a note from early 1887, Nietzsche writes, “Beauty” is for the artist something outside all orders of rank, because in beauty opposites are tamed; the highest sign of power, namely power over opposites; moreover, without tension - that violence is no longer needed; that everything follows, obeys, so easily and so pleasantly - that is what delights the artist's will to power'. It is because beauty and art represent a supreme act of organization and control over its elements that they render existence meaningful. The organizational perfection rendered possible in the gesture of artistic creation inspires

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Rampley, 185

the goal of the interpretative process to gain ever increasing control over and organization of its environment.

Much more so than Freud, it is Nietzsche's outlook on the purely human and sexual that seems to me particularly useful for the understanding of the works at the core of this study. The notion of the sexual act at its starkest, frankest and most basic level is never too far from the narrative. From the more or less conventional representation in Céline and Drieu (inasmuch as we are dealing there with consensual heterosexual couples) to the extravagant, gender-bending orgiastic configurations in Genet to the pedophilic pursuits of *Lolita*, sex is omnipresent. It represents an alternative to conventional existence, a moment of blissful oblivion. The sexual act and particularly its culmination, the orgasm – and this study duly notes quite a few examples of spectacular ejaculations, is likewise a moment of complete acceptance of oneself with one's most primordial characteristics and drives. Furthermore, it is an acknowledgment of the closeness and intimacy brought about by the partner. By succumbing to the sex drive, we succumb to life on its own terms – and hence rejoice in an experience which is more intense than anything we might have resisted. In order to understand the attraction of the purely erotic – which I would like to extend here to the purely human and organic, we must remind ourselves once again of the theories of eroticism elaborated by Georges Bataille. They give us another angle on virtually the same phenomenon. In *L'Erotisme*, for example, Bataille claims that interdiction (in our case, the formal reprimanding of our characters for engaging in behavior which might be considered unethical) is what enables the existence of a rational and ordered civilization. Civilization, by its very nature, is diametrically opposite from the animal world of nature. However, in nature, we find



ourselves in the presence of what Bataille would refer to as the sacred. The latter is also characterized as an affective experience of horror before that which overwhelms us. Thus, in *L'Erotisme*, interdiction belongs simultaneously to the profane world it opens as well as to the world of the sacred – a gesture which we will see repeated in the novels in question.

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy is even more indispensable to the understanding of the specific works of art we are dealing with within the framework of the present analysis, because he is the first thinker to openly proclaim the death of God. In doing so, he does not announce the end of religion as such but rather, the dawning of an age in which there no longer is one ultimate, supreme and undisputed organizational power. Heidegger points out that Nietzsche developed a stance which had entered European discourse through Turgenev and was known as nihilism. The latter is the sentiment that, to quote Heidegger, "only beings that one experiences oneself, only these and nothing else are real and have being."<sup>42</sup> According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's greatest contribution to the Twentieth century is having recognized a trend which had already been in place for decades. In the terse and unequivocal "God is dead", he has concentrated a plethora of other meanings. The "Christian God" is in fact the "transcendent" (the inverted commas belong to the original) and can be replaced by notions such as "ideals", "norms", "principles", "rules", "ends", "values" – in short, all categories set "above" the being: "Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the "transcendent" becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning. Nihilism is the history of the being itself through which the death of the

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<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, 47

Christian God comes slowly but inexorably to light.”<sup>43</sup> It is clear that this new outlook calls for the total erasure of erstwhile values and manners of interpreting reality, or, as per Nietzsche’s expression, “the revaluation of all values hitherto.”<sup>44</sup> However, I would like to insist here upon a very important change which the philosopher introduces and which Heidegger recognizes. Every previous century has been characterized by a modification and rethinking of values. However, in Nietzsche’s philosophy, it is no longer mere modification and adjustment we are dealing with. “Reevaluation” here means that the very “place” for previous values disappears, not merely that the values themselves fall away. This implies that the nature of direction of valuation, and “the definition of the essence of value are transformed,”<sup>45</sup> Heidegger claims. Thus, in a manner of speaking, Nietzsche “unties” humanity’s hands and suggests that there is a possibility for a constant reinvention and reinterpretation of the surrounding world.

In conclusion, this study presents us with a selection of artists who appear free to govern a universe they have themselves created. They have the freedom to choose what is valuable. They exist within a framework in which everyone can, potentially, create their own aesthetic totality and explore the implications of idiosyncratic laws and organization. If they have chosen to depict aspects of existence which are disturbing, it is to underscore that, above all, our life is always worth living.

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<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, 47

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 83

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## “Ecrire autour de l’émotion ”<sup>46</sup>

### Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932)

#### I.

Je ne fais pas de la littérature du repos.

(Céline, letter to Léon Daudet)<sup>47</sup>

In 1955, two decades after the publication of his first novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline had, as per his own assessment, become “an unmentionable man.”<sup>48</sup> The force of his passions, which led him to undeniable excesses, had by then earned him the ineradicable stigmas of anti-Semite<sup>49</sup>, paranoiac, misogynist and

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<sup>46</sup> "Ce style, il est fait d'une certaine façon de forcer les phrases à sortir légèrement de leur signification habituelle, de les sortir des gonds pour ainsi dire, les déplacer, et forcer ainsi le lecteur à lui-même de placer son sens. Mais très légèrement! . C'est très difficile à faire, parce qu'il faut tourner autour. Autour de quoi ? Autour de l'émotion. Alors là, j'en reviens à ma grande attaque contre le Verbe. Vous savez, dans les Ecritures, il est écrit: 'Au commencement était le Verbe.' Non! Au commencement était l'émotion." ("Louis-Ferdinand Céline vous parle," in *Romans II*, op. cit., 933)

<sup>47</sup> "Lettre à Leon Daudet" (1936), I:1121. (All references coded with roman numerals refer to the corresponding Pléiade editions of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s novels.)

<sup>48</sup> *Conversations with Professor Y*, Stanford translation, 29

<sup>49</sup> In popular imagination, Louis Ferdinand Céline is typically associated with a passionate hatred for Jewish people. However, as Philippe Alméras points out, he is far from being the only one to uphold such a questionable stance. In introduction to his article “Céline’s Masquerade”, Alméras justly observes that “the aspect of Céline’s writing which has generated the most controversy – his anti-Semitism – is, in the final analysis, the most commonplace. His century and his generation were as spontaneously anti-Semitic as they were misogynist.” (Alméras, *op.cit.*, 65) The writer's widow, Lucette Destouches, has always maintained

misanthrope. The writer had only recently (1951) returned from Denmark, where he had spent six years in exile. Following an eighteen-month stint in a Copenhagen prison, he had taken up residence on the Baltic sea shore, in the town of Klarksovsgaard, in a small house his lawyer had lent him. Back in France, he was living in the Parisian suburb of Meudon, where, he insisted, he dwelled in poverty and semi-oblivion.<sup>50</sup> The discomfort of everyday existence, however, did not prevent him from furiously producing novel after novel and continuously giving the world a piece of his mind.<sup>51</sup> Paranoid and bitter, he went as far as to suspect that people wanted him dead: “Ils viennent de temps en temps”, Céline points out to Pierre Audinet in what would ultimately become one of his last interviews, “ils envoient des reporters afin de s’informer du stade de la décrépitude, si j’ai bien commencé mon agonie, si je serai bientôt mort.”<sup>52</sup>

It hardly came as a surprise to Céline that he might fall out of favor with the reading public to such an extent. He had always maintained that the “true life of the true [writer]” is nothing but a “long or short game of tag with prison”, invariably ending with

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(most recently in her conversations with Veronique Robert), that Céline’s aim in publishing his anti-Semitic writing was purely pacifistic: “Il a toujours affirme avoir écrit ses pamphlets en 1938 et 1939 [sic] dans un but pacifique, et rien de plus. Pour lui, les juifs poussaient a la guerre et il voulait l’éviter. C’est tout” (Robert, 127-8)

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Monnier, author of the most comprehensive study of the period between 1944 and 1956 in Céline’s life, attributes this oblivion to a conspiracy of silence, maintained by “les chiens de garde de l’intelligentsia terroriste au pouvoir.” (*Ferdinand furieux*, 10)

<sup>51</sup> Observes writer Marcel Aymé, Céline’s closest friend, “Sachant qu’il était en France le seul grand écrivain de son temps, ce lui était une jouissance de se voir traiter dans les journaux tantôt avec une condescendance amusée tantôt avec un mépris hautain ». (In *Cahiers de l’Herne*, N 3 et 5. L’Herne, 1963-1965. Henceforth referred to as *HER* followed by the number) *HER* 3, 4

<sup>52</sup> Audinet, 15

“the scaffold ... awaiting every artist.”<sup>53</sup> He had wanted to name his most controversial anti-Semitic pamphlet, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*<sup>54</sup>, *Honni soit*. The title choice suggests that he not only expected rebuttal from his reader, but that he also thrived on it. What’s more striking, however, is that Céline’s most devoted admirers and critics alike are quite content with the bad reputation which goes along with his name. Indeed, it would seem as though they would wish for nothing better: Dominique De Roux, for example, states that, “ce serait donc une erreur fondamentale que de se permettre une objectivité quelconque à l’égard des écrits céliniens. Céline est **inadmissible** et il est à souhaiter que cet état de choses dure longtemps encore. *Le Voyage au bout de la nuit* tout autant que ses pamphlets se situent à la fois en deçà et au-delà de toute pensée salvatrice collective.”<sup>55</sup>

Yet nothing in the way in which Céline’s first novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was received, lead one to suppose that he would end up, a mere twenty years later, as the “unmentionable man” he had become. *Voyage*’s publication constituted a true literary event. It was hailed it as a masterpiece, completely deserving of the Goncourt prize for which it was immediately considered.<sup>56</sup> Its failure to obtain the prestigious award was

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<sup>53</sup> *Conversations with Professor Y*, 29

<sup>54</sup> As announced on the verso of the half title of *Mea Culpa* suivi de *Semmelweis* (Paris, 1937)

<sup>55</sup> *HER* 3, 2. Emphasis mine.

<sup>56</sup> In “L’action française » from December 22, 1932, influential literary critic Léon Daudet writes :

Voici un livre étonnant, appartenant par sa facture, sa liberté, sa hardiesse truculente plus au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle qu’au XX<sup>e</sup>, et que certains trouveront révoltant, insoutenable, atroce, qui en enthousiasmera d’autres, et qui, sous le débraille apparent, cache une connaissance approfondie de la langue française, dans sa branche male et débridée ... Proust est le Balzac du pautage ... de là une

attributed to the novel's revolutionary style and format and not in the least to a lack of literary merits. Claims were made that it was too powerful and original for the conservative Academy to handle.<sup>57</sup> Rightist and leftist groups were equally stirred by the publication.<sup>58</sup> One reviewer summed up the array of attitudes by describing *Voyage* as an "enormous, filthy boulder" that had fallen into the "little garden" of French letters.<sup>59</sup> In *Céline, écrivain arrivé*, Jean Guenot points out that after such a flying start, Céline could have become a highly successful commercial author "had he learned how to be docile"<sup>60</sup>.

Today, "docile" is the adjective all literary critics would least readily associate with Céline's oeuvre. Opinions of the novel, however, remain quite divided. Two

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certaine fatigue dont Monsieur Céline (pseudonyme du docteur Destouches) va libérer sa génération

For more enthusiastic endorsements, see Léon Daudet, "L.-F. Céline: *Voyage au bout de la nuit*," *Candida*, 22 December 1932, 6; Pierre Seize, "La Vérité sur Léon Daudet," *Canard enchaîné* 859 (14 December 1932); L. Christophe, "Voyage," *Gazette* 297 (23 October 1932): 4.

<sup>57</sup> Luce and Buckley, 124-38

<sup>58</sup> See Alméras, 22-28. The left's enthusiastic acceptance of *Voyage* is particularly curious in light of Céline's subsequent reputation as anti-Semitic and supporter of the Nazis. Among left-wing intellectuals, he was considered as a populist writer. Georges Altman, literary critic of *Humanité*, was the first one to point out the significance of *Voyage* (alongside Léon Daudet). Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, who translated *Voyage* into Russian a year after its initial publication, went as far as to claim that it was essentially inspired by the situation in the Soviet Union. For more information on the left's endorsement of the novel, see Guenot, Jean, pp 17-24 and Bardèche, pp 102-3.

<sup>59</sup> Aristide, "Journey," *Aux écoutes* 761, 17 December 1932, 27

<sup>60</sup> See Guenot, 10-17. The very definition of a "successful" / "arrivé" writer is interesting inasmuch as it allows Guenot to compare Céline to none other than Victor Hugo. Much like the nineteenth-century writer, Guenot argues, Céline was "connu des gens qui ne lisent pas, jaloué de son vivant; on lui décerne des prix littéraires; il est lu à des académies; il a du pouvoir dans l'industrie du livre; il gagne de l'argent avec ce qu'il écrit."

conventional reality. To me, the greatest merit of the novel lies in its ability to create not realistic notions, but, rather, an alternative space. The latter functions as an escape vault in which oppressive quotidian occurrences are transformed into more intense and meaningful experiences through the power of art. I'd like to argue that it is Louis Ferdinand Céline's vehement and explosive diction that catapults the reader into this alternative space. More than any other work we will be examining in the course of the present study, Céline's novel forces the reader to *experience* the narrative by becoming a part of it. Despite the morally alarming aspects of reality it depicts, *Voyage* provokes a strong aesthetic response. It is for this very reason that one can inscribe it successfully within the larger question we are trying to answer: how can we account for the compelling and elevating aspects of a deeply disturbing work of art.

In order to streamline our commentary, I suggest we divide it into two parts. The first one will open with an analysis of the book's title, followed by an analysis of the three elements which appear essential to the narrative. In the second part, we will explore the ways in which these separate aspects come together to create a work of art, characterized by a strong sense of unity and a tight internal logic.

## II.

*Voyage au bout de la nuit* is one of the most aptly named works in world literature. The title of the novel successfully references the three most important aspects of the narrative. Let us consider them individually. First and foremost, we will explore the reasoning behind Céline's choice to write a novel about journey, traveling and perpetual displacement. Then, we will focus on the meaning and the implications of darkness and night. Finally, we will consider the possible connotations of the preposition we find at the center of the title. I would like to draw attention to the original French preposition, *au bout de*, rather than replace it with its English translation. *Journey to the end of the night* fails to transmit the full connotative array implied in the French title. "Au bout de" means more than just "to" or "until". It designates a limit and an end. It also references the movement towards reaching this limit. The last section of Part One of the present study will focus on this notion of the limit and explore the variety of boundaries the narrative describes, as well as the ways in which it aims at surpassing them.

The metaphor of the journey is central to the narrative in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, as well as the Célinian worldview in general. It would reappear, both literally and figuratively, in all of the subsequent novels. The writer himself described movement and walking as central to his artistic process:

La vie objective réelle m'est impossible, insupportable. – J'en deviens fou, enragé, tellement elle me semble atroce. Alors, je la transpose tout en rêvant, tout en marchant ...



Je suppose que c'est à peu près la maladie générale que tout le monde appelle poésie ...  
[...] Je m'en façonne sur terre une sorte de paradis artificiel.<sup>62</sup>

These couple of lines sum up brilliantly the essence of Louis Ferdinand Céline's outlook on life and art. Let us take a look at the key terms. Objective reality is described through words such as atrocity, madness and sickness. The only way to go beyond this distressing state of affairs is by "transposing" it onto the artwork while walking and dreaming.

By inscribing *Voyage* within the larger frame of reference of travel and displacement, Céline exploits the possibilities of a traditional *topos*. In certain respects, Bardamu reminds us of the heroes of more classical novels.<sup>63</sup> *Voyage*, much like Aragon's *Le Mouvement perpétuel* and *Le Paysan de Paris*, is inspired by the language of troubadours. It borrows liberally from the ancient French idiom.<sup>64</sup> Many critics have compared Bardamu to the wandering picaros of the early Spanish novel, the Knight errant

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<sup>62</sup> HER 5, p 84

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed discussion on the possible inspirations behind Bardamu, see *Céline, écrivain arrivé*, 70-78. Guenot claims that Bardamu was largely modeled after Céline's acquaintance Marcel Lafaye, born in 1897. The writer and Lafaye met in the summer of 1928. They belonged to the same exclusive bohemian society which gathered around Montmartre. The resemblances between Lafaye's life and that of Bardamu's are striking indeed. *Ancient combattant*, Lafaye had lived and worked for an export-import company in Africa. In 1929, he had gone to the US. He had worked for Ford in Detroit. Céline and him remained in touch and corresponded regularly. While in Detroit, Marcel has a girlfriend called Dorothée. Much like Molly would do for Bardamu, she bought him a suit for 15 dollars and made him quit the assembly line to become a clerk. Lafaye would sponsor the publication of his autobiography, called *L'étranger vêtu de noir* in 1958. (See Godard, 78)

<sup>64</sup> See Godard, 200-201.

of medieval French literature, Fielding's wandering satires or Ulysses – both the Ancient Greek hero from the *Odyssey* and Joyce's eponymous character.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout the narrative, all the characters are constantly in motion. Critic Ralph Schoolcraft notes, “[This restless novel] is overrun by elaborate batteries of transport: bus, bicycle, boat, balloon, even bumper car. The characters themselves can hardly sit still - running, dancing, falling down, back on their feet and wandering around. In the world of Celine's hardluck outcasts, motion and commotion, bustle and boom are the general rule.”<sup>66</sup> For all the wanderings and changes of scenery, however, a closer look would reveal that Bardamu's journey resembles the footloose ways of the picaresque only on a superficial level. Unlike *Naked Lunch*, which was in part inspired by Céline's novel but which lack any formal structure, the fragments composing *Voyage* obey a strict logic. The episodes of displacement are crucial to the structure of the narrative. They allow us to string it together and allow us a glimpse into a wide variety of situations. However, the most important function of the journey is revealed on the metaphorical level. The voyage, Bardamu notes, is a search for “le plus grand chagrin possible pour devenir soi-même

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<sup>65</sup> For more information on the correspondences between *Ulysses* and *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, see Bardèche, pp 75-77. According to the critic, one is invited to see a parallel between the two novels as both can be divided into four easily identifiable parts. Bardèche calls them *islands*. They are as follows, Isle of War, colonization, Africa and the island of misery. The protagonist literally drowns whenever he reaches the island of Love. The parallel is that much more likely if we consider that Joyce's monumental opus treated more or less similar themes (the place of the individual in society, the relationships between human beings, the senselessness of existence). It appears merely 5 years before *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Céline would claim that he never read *Ulysses*, and one is tempted to believe him. However, this fact does not change anything, for he most certainly was aware of its being *talked about*.

<sup>66</sup> Schoolcraft, 840.

avant de mourir” (*VaBN*, 236)<sup>67</sup>. As such, it is also a quest for self-knowledge. It is not a coincidence that suffering is equated with getting to know oneself in this brief sentence. As he goes through life, Bardamu encounters pain, violence, distress and wretchedness. Occasionally, however, there would be a rare glimpse of clarity and genuine affection. In this sense, the voyage is a metaphor for life.

For the most part, the journey of Céline’s protagonist through life is a laborious and difficult one. From the outset, this impression is conveyed through the main character’s highly unusual name, Bardamu. Buried in it lies *barda*, a military knapsack. And, since the initial chapter of the novel takes place at the front during World War One, the name is an appropriate one, for it provides us with a strong visual image. On a more figurative level, the *barda* alludes to the ensemble of burdens one carries throughout life. The opening pages of the novel insist upon the notion of colossal weight Bardamu is constantly trudging around: “Un mois de sommeil sur chaque paupière voilà ce que nous portions et autant derrière la tête, en plus de ces kilos de ferraille” (*VaBN*, 28). Thus, the *barda* serves as a metonymic indicator of the war’s horrors. It accompanies Bardamu throughout the endless foot patrols that constitute his tour of duty and which he carries out without complaining. Yves de la Quérière takes the analogy even further as he points out that,

Before this story begins, this prototype of Céline’s is a docile carrier of set ideas and proper behaviors he does not dare to challenge: in other terms, a *Barda-mule* and at the same time a *Barda-muet* – or “mute” – the one who never says anything. This is what suggest to me the first two lines of the book. [...] The once *mute* young man makes up

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<sup>67</sup> All quotations in this chapter come from *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Paris: Folio Gallimard, 2000 edition. The novel’s title will henceforth be abbreviated to *VaBN*.

for his years of silence and starts a mutation (*Barda mue*), which is about to make him open up, say it all and become a *bard*.<sup>68</sup>

De la Quérière is right to talk about the bard here, for it is certain that the very experiences of the war inspire the protagonist to put his life in writing. And while the *barda* furnishes an appropriate metonymic analogy with the horrors of war, it does not disappear with the armistice. The reality of civil life turns out to be much more despairing than anything war-time reality could have brought about. The journey is far from over. Maurice Bardèche writes in *Louis-Ferdinand Céline*,

Tout le voyage n'est qu'une réponse aux illusions du maréchal des logis Louis Destouches. ... Il y a plus de Stendhal qu'on ne croit dans Céline : son œuvre, c'est l'itinéraire de la désillusion. On comprend dans le *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* que la réalité de la guerre fut pour lui un étonnement : pas un désastre. Ce n'était pas une guerre de cavalerie, voilà tout, pas de charges exaltés : une guerre triste. C'est l'*arrière* qui le démoralisa : comme beaucoup d'autres combattants, l'*arrière* avec ses comédies, ses mensonges, ses planqués, ses feintes tendresses, ses hystériques. Et il se trouva qu'il vit le pire de l'*arrière*, ce qu'on ne mentionnait jamais, les services de "récupération."<sup>69</sup>

After the war, Bardamu would go on to travel to Africa, the US and back to France. As we follow him from continent to continent, we become convinced that in *Voyage*, there can be no shirking one's burden in life. Instead, one merely transports it from place to place, taking on new hardships just as soon as it seems that the old ones have been shed. At the same time, the journey is also the best way to get to know one's fellow men.

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<sup>68</sup> De la Quérière: 281

<sup>69</sup> Bardèche, 25-26

Bardamu's observations echo those of his creator. Inspiration for the episodes of the novel has been derived largely from Céline's own experiences in Africa and London in 1915-16. In his letters, he would write, "Il me fallait cette grande épreuve pour connaître le fond de mes semblables sur lesquels j'avais de grands doutes. La chose est faite, je les ai classés."<sup>70</sup>

A further breakdown of the protagonist's name reveals the verb "mu(er)," i.e., molting or shedding, getting rid of a protective hard shell. This is hardly a coincidence. The very beginning of the novel establishes a parallel between survival and the ability to rid oneself of excess baggage. Early on, we see Bardamu's alter ego, Robinson, quitting their regiment and running away. As will be the case on a number of other occasions, here Robinson finds the courage to accomplish what the other one has been too scared or too weak to do. The act of desertion is symbolized by a leaving behind and shedding of unnecessary weight: "Et pour foutre le camp plus vite, j'ai laissé tomber le barda et puis les armes aussi" (*VaBN*, 42). So convinced is Robinson that letting go of the clothes – symbol of his association with and participation in the cruelty of the outside world – is the only way to survive, that he carries the image of shedding its absolute extreme. He is ready to cross the lines naked. He wants to present the Germans with the least war-like appearance possible. To him, this is the only way to save himself: "Si on pouvait arriver à poil aux Allemands, c'est ça qui vaudrait encore mieux" (*VaBN*, 43).

Thus, the simplicity and helplessness traditionally associated with being naked becomes equivalent to salvation. Shedding one's protective carapace is a decisive and symbolic gesture. It renders one is more helpless, but also brings one closer to one's true

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<sup>70</sup> *Cahiers Céline*, 4, 63

self. We are reminded here of Georges Bataille's concept of the *mise à nu*. In Bataille, nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession. It is synonymous with the quest for possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. It allows the body to open out to the surrounding world. Nakedness activates secret channels whose proper function has been obstructed by the clothing.<sup>71</sup> In Bataille, the act of stripping one's clothes off is linked to the erotic. In the liberation of the self from its outer shell, Bataille sees an ultimate embracing of obscenity. In Céline, the gesture is not sexual, but is also symbolic of the refusal of common decency. The act of desertion we see in the rejection of the military uniform, is a problematic one. However, even more disturbing is the suggestion that it is the sole reasonable thing to do if one follows one's survival instinct. The only way to escape the folly of others is through the act of willingly abandoning unnecessary encumbrances.

The narrative of *Voyage* imitates the longing for plainness and austerity suggested by the analogy with the naked human body. *Voyage* is not a verbose novel. Céline's style is extremely taut. The narration is precise and devoid of much ornamentation. Even on a purely visual level, the text appears curiously unencumbered. The sentences are short. The dialogue and the descriptions are punctuated by ellipses which further fragment the narrative. We have already touched upon the ways in which the modern narrative becomes a quest for continuity and the linking of seemingly disjointed fragments. By employing the ellipses, Céline unequivocally invites the reader to share the narrative experience by filling in the blanks.

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<sup>71</sup> Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, 12

As Bardamu and his surrogate, Robinson, progress further into the darkness in their never-ending journey, the focus inevitably shifts towards the extremes of **violence and perversion**.<sup>72</sup> Those tendencies are sensed to be the product of an existential fear which the mere fact of being alive provokes in everyone “L’existence, ça vous tord et ça vous écrase la face,” Bardamu would warn us. (*VaBN*, 149) It is extremely important that the journey not be treated as a literal one. It is rather a dream-like state of heightened consciousness which permits one to experience reality on a different level. It emerges ultimately as an attempt to understand not just the war, not just the forms of injustice the protagonist encounters, but the negative forces at work in the human psyche. As André Gide has very astutely observed, he does not paint reality but rather, the hallucination it provokes.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Tilby, 104

<sup>73</sup> André Gide, “Les Juifs, Celine et Marutain,” *HER* 5, 337

### III.

The majority of the important events in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* take place at night-time. The brighter the light of day, the harder it is to describe anything. The narrator finds himself completely overwhelmed by light and color:

Il est difficile de regarder en conscience les gens et les choses des tropiques à cause des couleurs qui en éminent. Elles sont en ébullition les couleurs et les choses. Une petite boîte de sardines ouverte en plein midi sur la chaussée projette tant de reflets divers qu'elle prend pour les yeux l'importance d'un accident" (*VaBN*, 158-9).

Further, Bardamu would reiterate the same impossibility: "Je n'oserais pas affirmer que je puisse aujourd'hui décrire ces jardins sans commettre de fautes grossières et fantastiques." (*VaBN*, 227) We are thus invited to treat objective reality with suspicion, and have more faith in the night. Whenever something takes place in broad daylight, we always have the impression that the landscape is covered by a filter, or film of fog which renders it obscure and ambiguous. This careful "veiling" prompts the reader constantly to put notions of reality into question.

Céline himself likened the process of composing *Voyage* to a dream. In 1930, in response to a question about what he was currently working on, the writer would state "Il ne s'agit pas d'une oeuvre: "aucune prétention et pas de littérature, mon Dieu non. Mais j'ai en moi mille pages de cauchemars en réserve, celui de la guerre tient naturellement la tête."<sup>74</sup> Thus, it comes as no surprise that the sentiment of living in a dream never

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<sup>74</sup> Alméras: 102



actually leaves Bardamu. It seeps into everything he encounters. In its most extreme form, it brings about nightmares, in which Céline's protagonist struggles to resist being engulfed by the vortex of the night. Somnolence and dreaming, by virtue of their providing an alternative to reality, are considered a necessary prerequisite for gaining better understanding of the surrounding world. They allow us to ascend to a universe in which we experience a heightened sensitivity and a gain greater insight.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke establishes a helpful parallel between dreaming and living in a more intense universe, which he calls ecstatic. In the chapter entitled "On the Modes of Thinking", he asks a rhetorical question: "Whether that which we call Extasie, be not dreaming with the Eyes open, I leave to be examined."<sup>75</sup> Locke considered the ecstatic state of "dreaming with eyes open" superior to quotidian existence. In it, we maintain more focus and are not distracted by outside phenomena: "[D]reaming itself is the having of ideas (whilst the outward senses are stopped, so that they receive not outward objects with their usual quickness) in the mind, not suggested by any external objects, or known occasion; nor under any choice or conduct of the understanding at all,"<sup>76</sup> he would claim.

In order to understand the importance of the state of somnolence for *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, it would be helpful to look into the ways in which it constitutes a part of the literary and philosophical discourse of the turn of the Twentieth century. A generation before Céline, Spanish-American poet Antonio Machado's works explore a similar state

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<sup>75</sup> Locke, 135.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

of consciousness. Machado called it “dream regions.”<sup>77</sup> In his art, those constituted a privileged ground where one was capable of true seeing and understanding. He placed no value on what ordinary vision reported. He distrusted that which he saw in broad daylight and maintained that a state of somnolence allowed one to access a more meaningful and fuller reality.

The reasons behind the fascination the dream-like state and the night hold for the artists at the turn of the Twentieth century would, without a doubt, make a fascinating study in itself. Owing to practical constraints, we can only briefly touch upon some of the reasons behind this heightened interest. First of all, let us remind ourselves that, strictly etymologically speaking, in French, the verb *rêver* has a double meaning. As Robert Morrissey points out,

A l'article *rêver* du dictionnaire de Godefroy constate d'une manière quelque peu elliptique les deux significations principales du verbe: (1) roder, vagabonder; (2) délirer. S'appuyant sur la notion de vagabondage, il remonte au latin où il trouve l'adjectif *vagus*, vagabond, errant; inconstant (dans l'amour et dans les opinions); qui est hors de soi, en délire; vague, indécis, perplexe, coureur, libertin.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, as the quote above demonstrates, the notion of movement and displacement, which characterize the voyage, is quite literally a part of the notion of the dream as well. It is a

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<sup>77</sup> In his poetry, Machado oscillates between the irrationalism of the romantics, and the metaphysical idealism of the post-romantic era. In his work, he confines his world to the boundaries of the psychological awareness and "explores the more or less subterranean city of his dreams" ("Los complementarios." In *Poesias completas*, op.cit, 114-115)

<sup>78</sup> Morrissey, 272

well-known fact that we find dreaming at the core of Freud's investigations of the psyche. It has proven pivotal to the unlocking of a parallel human universe, in which the world is thought of perceived in an entirely different manner. In the visual arts, the universe of the dreams comes to life in the art of the Surrealists and later, the abstract painters. If the state of somnolence was considered so fascinating, it is also because it is characterized by a heightened awareness, and an effacement of the borderline between the objective and the subjective. The resulting universe is subjected solely to the control of one's spirit, and is guided and ordered by one's creative impulses. In the peculiar state between dream and consciousness, the mind "participates"<sup>79</sup> in all forms and beings. One is capable of attaining blissful harmony and enjoys nothing outside oneself and one's own existence. Opposition to the world is renounced, and the self can no longer be

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<sup>79</sup> I refer here to the notion of participation as it was spelled out in the works of early modern anthropologists such as Lévy-Bruhl. He is one of the first scholars in the contemporary Western tradition to argue against the rationalist tradition in favor of radically different kinds of knowledge. He successfully prefigured modern sensibility when, in 1899, he questioned the validity of the Cartesian method and lucidity: "Such a philosophy . . . will scarcely admit of the instantaneous divination of the absolute, the mystical intuition which is superior to reason and which dispenses with logical demonstration" (*History*, 472). He found a useful counterpoint to Descartes' rigor in the traditions of non-European cultures who, according to him, possessed a primitive mentality. The theory of the primitive mentality insists on a fusion between subject and object in a way which allows one to participate in it and thus experience it more truthfully and completely. In addition to representing its object, primitive mentality becomes part of it in ways uncanny to the Western mind: "elle le possède et elle en est possédée. . . . Elle en participe au sens non seulement représentatif, mais a la fois physique et mystique, du mot." (*Mentalité primitive*, 426) It seems to me that the force of the aesthetic experience provoked by a novel like *Voyage au bout de la nuit* lies precisely in the ways in which it allows us to become one with the narrative in a way conventional Western literary analysis is incapable of explaining.

distinguished from the cosmos. So long as this state endures, one is self-sufficient like God.

The state described above is virtually unattainable in real life, but fully possible in art. In the section devoted to language, we will have the opportunity to explore the ways in which *Voyage au bout de la nuit* influences the experience of the reader by literally shutting him off from the outside world and forcing him to live within the narrative. This aspect of the novel reminds one of the experiences described by some of the most prominent religious mystics. Isolating yourself from the outside world and turning inward is pivotal for the mystic experience. This is confirmed on an epistemological level as well, as the words *mystery* and *mysticism* come from the Greek *myein*. *Myein* means closing the eyes and ears to the influence of all things external.<sup>80</sup> Hence, one of the traditional meanings of the term mystical consciousness refers to the total suppression of the empirical content of the mind. The emptying and withdrawal from all sensory-intellectual data is done in favor of a nonintellectual, and therefore ineffable, mode of awareness. In *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Céline explores transcendence and the possibility to distance oneself from a vulgar and ordinary mode of existence. By plunging

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<sup>80</sup> Lacking personal knowledge about mysticism, some sociologists of religion tended to define mysticism in terms of their reductionism. Thus, Joachin Wach claimed that the Greek word *myein* meant "to close one's self up against the outer world and with it against society, as against all distracting and disturbing influences." (Wach, 163.) The late Neoplatonists used the word in the way Wach suggested. However, *myein* is simply translated as "to close." In Koine Greek, however, it means "to initiate." Originally, this connotation was probably used to remind initiates to keep quiet about "the mysteries" they had been given access to. *Myein* also might refer to a spiritual technique of squinting the eyes to see spirits, animals, and so on from another world. It might also be used about somebody whose eyes still were shut but who was about to be initiated. (Inge, 3-4)

the reader into the night and the dream-like state which characterizes it, *Voyage* allows the reader to leave the present. One is no longer tied by conventions, and can **disregard the constraints of quotidian morality**. By suspending conventional judgment, one is able to experience the artwork, as well as existence, on their own terms.

It is likewise no accident that the majority of the narrative takes place at night. Dark, lonely places are conducive to achieving spiritual illumination. Therefore, they occupy a necessary place in the development of the higher mystical insight. The notion of the "dark night" has most famously been laid down by the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, a disciple of St. Theresa, in a work entitled *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In this book, John gives systematic form to the experiences through which Theresa and others had passed, and which they described as torture, uncertainty, intense suffering followed by a period of tranquility and illumination.<sup>81</sup> John of the Cross distinguishes two forms of

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<sup>81</sup> In St. Theresa's case, the "dark night" is brief and broken. Nonetheless, it constitutes an almost continuous experience of gloom accentuated by bodily illness but not relieved by restoration of health. The characteristics of the state may be summarized as follows: Earlier spiritual experiences are forgotten or suspected of unreality; religious exercises are empty and meaningless; sharp temptations to sin assail the mind, sometimes in the form of demon apparitions, while doubt, despair, and an unrelieved melancholy settle down upon the soul. St. Theresa describes her soul as "a football in the hands of devils." Writes Theresa,

It is impossible to describe the sufferings of the soul in this state. It goes about in quest of relief, and God suffers it to find none. .... Temptations seem to press it down and make it dull, so that its knowledge of God becomes to it as that of something which it hears of far away .... If it seeks relief from the fire by spiritual reading, it cannot find any, just as if it could not read at all. On one occasion it occurred to me to read the life of a Saint, that I might forget myself and be refreshed with the recital of what he had suffered. Four or five times I read many lines; and though they were written in Spanish, I understood them

the "dark night" at two distinct stages in the mystic life. The first one, "la nuit des sens", occurs on the threshold of the contemplative life. The second one, "la nuit de l'esprit," takes place between the period of contemplation and the period of final union.<sup>82</sup> John of the Cross insists on "the wilderness" being the place where one achieves a "desolated alienation from self".

The metaphors of darkness and night are crucial for the understanding of *Voyage*. They are also crucial to Bardamu's journey. As is the case for the mystics of all religions, understanding and wisdom come upon the individual like a ray of light in despairing darkness. But in order to have access to the illumination of truth and understanding, one must first of all suffer. In his *Mystical Theology*, an earlier author, Dionysius the Areopagite, speaks again and again of coming into the Darkness, which is beyond Light, and looking for "the knowledge of that Unknowing."<sup>83</sup> He describes enlightenment as the sensation of being led upward to "the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds all existence."<sup>84</sup> The techniques common to Western mystics presuppose a suppression of sensory-intellectual faculties in favor of what is referred to as mystical intuition. It

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less at the end than I did when I began: so I gave it up. It so happened to me on more occasions than one. (*Vita*, chap xxx, 13-14, cited by Underhill, 469.)

<sup>82</sup> Vide Granger, *The Soul of a Christian*, chap. vi.

<sup>83</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1. To quote Dionysius the Areopagite further, the person experiencing this state renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else. ... and being through the passive still need of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Imperato, 93

requires the mind to empty itself of all empirical contents from the mind in order to enter the dark way, the world of nothing.<sup>85</sup> To Dionysius, God, who is unknowable through reason, can be known only through the “Darkness of Unknowing”.<sup>86</sup> Night is therefore necessary for the attaining of a wisdom and revelation.

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<sup>85</sup> Barnstone, 159

<sup>86</sup> Darkness and obscurity are vital to the mystical experience. They provide anonymity and protection, but more importantly, they allow for the beacon of truth to shine ever more brightly. For more information on the implications of obscurity, see “Saint John of the Cross: The Doctor of Nothingness” in Barnstone, 153-179

#### IV.

“La folie fascine parce qu’elle est savoir”

Michel Foucault

As the previous section demonstrated, the notion of journey presents a literal analogy to movement and change. The latter can also be seen on a figurative level, as a voyage which leads one away from a condition of stasis and normalcy. The novel abounds in references to madness. In the latter part of the narrative, Bardamu even becomes the director of a lunatic asylum. The state of insanity is characterized by a movement from and ordinary to an extraordinary state. It signals a passage from a normal to an “altered state”, from being self-contained and standing in oneself (*enstasis*) to standing elsewhere (*ekstasis*). The early classical meaning of *ekstasis* is bewilderment, insanity, seizure, anger, terror. To be “beside oneself” or “out of mind” follows the etymological meaning. Even though it sometimes imitates the symptoms, which could generally be attributed to mental deviation, the notion of madness as applied to literature does not generally connote mental illness but rather, the individual’s ultimate dissociation from accepted societal norms. Since Freud and Nietzsche, there can be no doubt that what we’ve come to designate as “normal behavior” stops way short of representing the human experience. Therefore, as Shoshana Felman has demonstrated, the term “madness” designates a constitutive and differential relationship between writing and reading that highlights the inassimilable, outrageous character of a given work.<sup>87</sup>

In *Histoire de la folie*, Michel Foucault recognizes that modern literature’s essential function has been to attempt to give voice to unreason. In a world in which the

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<sup>87</sup> Shoshana Felman, *La Folie et la chose littéraire*, 1978



psychiatric asylum has banned folly's unreason from the realm of truth, Foucault argues, this is the only way to speak this truth. The philosopher details the mechanism which condemns those who do not conform to the rules of society, to a life in psychiatric asylums. Folly and unreason threaten the paradigm of normalcy, because they challenge the artificial rules designed to keep people in submission. In such a world, Foucault argues, madmen are the only ones who speak the truth. He uses Holderlin, Nietzsche and Artaud to illustrate his thesis. Céline's name is ostensibly missing from Foucault's list because, at least on the surface, the deranged behavior of his protagonists is due less to mental illness than it is to misanthropy. Still, I'd like to argue that the basic premises of *Histoire de la folie* can be used to understand Céline's works as well. What's more, throughout his lifetime, Céline was interested in the nature of madness. His first quasi-literary attempt, his doctoral thesis at the Faculté de médecine in Paris, focuses on a man who was considered quite mad. Céline wrote on Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-1865), a Hungarian obstetrician who discovered puerperal fever in expectant mothers. Initially ridiculed and held in disdain, Semmelweis was driven to insanity towards the end of his life. His work was appreciated only posthumously.

Foucault's opening chapter discusses how madness and reason, folly and truth were able to cohabit in the same discourse during the Renaissance, or roughly from the time of Bosch and Rabelais until Cervantes and Shakespeare. Even though he writes centuries later, the Célinian worldview is not incompatible with that of the Renaissance authors. In the words of the critic Thiher, "In many respects, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* enacts a renewal of the Renaissance belief that truth demands this total dialectic of the "book of the world" is to be read in its totality. [...] Madness could coexist with reason

because Renaissance Europeans viewed folly as giving access to a realm that mere reason could not open upon.<sup>88</sup> Much like the Renaissance artists, then, Céline accepted that madness can coexist with reason. They formed a kind of opposites relationship in which it is folly not to give in to folly. In other words, Céline realized that the only reasonable course of action, when confronted with a meaningless, oppressive reality, was to embrace the antipode of rational living, i.e. delirium, and explore the enlightenment it offers.

Time and again, we will encounter characters in *Voyage* who intentionally search for an opportunity to live deliriously. This is especially true in the portion of the book taking place in Africa. All the whites in the colonies suffer from the fever the tropics cause to the unaccustomed. They don't seem to mind, and even organize contests, "des concours de fièvre" (*VaBN*, 169). The particular febricity which accompanies feverishness is frequently evoked in the narrative. It serves a double purpose. On the one hand, the person who has a fever drifts in and out of consciousness. The senses become alternately dulled and sharpened. On the other hand, fever, much like madness, is an alternative state of existence, in which one can experience a different form of reality: "Je préférais rester stupéfié la, tremblotant, baveux dans les 40°, que d'être forcé lucide ... J'en arrivais à ne plus prendre de quinine pour bien laisser la fièvre me cacher la vie. On se saoule avec ce qu'on a," (*VaBN*, 219) Bardamu informs as he narrates his adventures in Africa.

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Buckley, *Critical Essays*. op. cit., 145. Other than Hindus, several other critics have attributed Céline's idiosyncratic treatment of the world around him to a paranoid or generally disturbed state. See Albert Chesneau, 1971; Dominique Durette (1972). Jean-Claude Ollivier treated the author more like a benign paranoid who is more likely to harm himself than others.

Last but not least, madness is, much like as saw in the case of nakedness, a survival mechanism in a world as senseless, cruel and wretched as the one described by Bardamu. During one of Lola's visits to the asylum in which he is put, for example, he bursts out in a passionate discourse:

Alors vivent les fous et les lâches ! Ou plutôt survivent les fous et les lâches ! Vous souvenez-vous d'un seul nom, par exemple, Lola, d'un de ces soldats tués pendant la guerre de Cent ans ? ... Ils vous sont aussi anonymes, indifférents et plus inconnus que le dernier atome du presse-papier devant nous, que votre crotte du matin ... Voyez donc bien qu'ils sont morts pour rien, Lola ! ... Il n'y a que la vie qui compte ". (*VaBN*, 82-3).

Céline was a great admirer of Bosch, Breughel and Goya. He knew their art and was particularly fascinated by their interpretation of madness. In a letter to Léon Daudet, written toward the end of 1932, he mentions Breughel's etching, *Fête des fous*, which he found fascinating and in which he recognized many of his own obsessions and preoccupations. The distorted facial expressions and bodies of the mad clearly indicate that they are in an altered state and inhabit a realm, totally removed from conventional existence. This is a state of being Céline attempted to recreate in his own writing. "My delirium takes a [similar] direction", Céline would write to Daudet. [...] "I take pleasure solely in that which is grotesque and situated at the limits of death. For me, all the rest is meaningless."<sup>89</sup> If he was as fascinated by *Fête des fous*, it is because the etching constitutes a work of art in which three powerful forces – madness, the grotesque and death - come together. Each one of them stands for a type of rejection of existence such

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<sup>89</sup> *HER*, 3. 63, 92, emphasis mine

as is experienced by most people. Madness is the renunciation of conformity on the level of society. Those considered as crazy find themselves outside the realm of the normal and are frequently locked up away from other people. The grotesque as we know from the theories of Ruskin, Kayser and Bakhtine, is the repudiation of conventional aesthetic norms. It is characterized by the coexistence of the ludicrous and the terrifying.<sup>90</sup> As for

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<sup>90</sup> The grotesque is an important category in art history and literary criticism. All of the novels in this study contain some elements of the grotesque, and it is therefore important to flesh out some of its most important characteristics. The beginnings of the discourse on the grotesque can be traced with fair certainty. Sometime around 1500, excavations beneath the city of Rome unearthed a series of ornamental wall paintings in which animal, vegetable, and mineral imagery mingled in bizarre fashion, deliberately confusing the animate with the inanimate. Human heads grew from trees, the faces of animals were attached to human bodies, garlands of flowers sprang from candelabra, and so forth. The paintings, which had been denounced as "monstrous" and "bastard" by the classical author Vitruvius in the age of Augustus, were discovered in grottes or caves. It is from this "underground" source that the adjective grottesco was derived.

Initially, the word "grotesque" referred solely to the ancient style of ornamentation. Not long afterward, however, the French author Rabelais used "grotesque" to describe deformed or "lower" aspects of the human body. By the eighteenth century in England and Germany, the term had become associated with artistic caricature. As a consequence, it took on purely pejorative or critical connotations. Finally, during the Victorian period, British art historian John Ruskin gave it an important definition that has influenced virtually all subsequent uses. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), Ruskin describes a series of "monstrous" heads, "leering in bestial degradation," which are carved on the Bridge of Sighs and other Venetian landmarks. From these sculptures, all of them conceived in a "spirit of idiotic mockery," he develops the following theory:

[I]t seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or the other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements: there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with

death, it is the ultimate antithesis of life, the limit of limits and, as we shall see below, the state beyond which nothing else is possible.

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no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest ("Grotesque Renaissance," op. cit., 207)

The most elaborate scholarly attempt to explore the full implication of the grotesque can be found in Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (translated into English in 1968). Kayser's study arrives at the notion that the grotesque constitutes a psychological strategy aimed at alienating us from the everyday world. Through the act of defamiliarization, we are able better to control or exorcize the absurdities and terrors of life. (For more information, see Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, op. cit)

Another influential theory is developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*. The Russian critic's analysis revolves around the "exuberant" or "carnavalesque" features of medieval Billingsgate and lower-body comedy. The latter, as Bakhtin would explain, is a popular social ritual devoted to various bodily excesses. It is directed against "superior powers of the sun, the earth, the king, the military leader." (Bakhtin, 352.) In the decades that follow, reflections on the grotesque view it as a somewhat broader category. It is simultaneously associated with the *carnavalesque* and the terrifying on the one hand, and with the monstrous, the uncanny, or the supernatural, on the other. In all its visual and verbal manifestations, however, the grotesque is structured by a dual implication. As such, it shares features with rhetorical figures as ambiguity, irony, and paradox. Its defining feature is what Philip Thompson describes as an "unresolved" tension between laughter and some unpleasant emotion such as disgust or fear (Thompson, 21)

## V.

The universe of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is first and foremost scarred by one undeletable experience – the war. Much like Drieu La Rochelle, Céline was directly influenced by the impressions World War One left on his psyche. It is only natural that the book should immediately plunge us into its atmosphere. Bardamu, the novel's protagonist, enlists into the army with astonishing readiness and spontaneity. He practically jumps at the opportunity as soon as it is presented to him. He sees a battalion marching on the street in the middle of a boring Parisian afternoon and joins them right away. His act is not just impulsive and rash, it is also highly ironic. It provides us with an opportunity to see how Céline views his and his fellow soldiers' participation in the First World War. The men who enlist appear immature and irrational. They do not appear inspired by lofty ideals. They do not even seem clear-sighted enough. These childlike young people, however, return from the front bitterly disillusioned. John Peale Bishop's now-classic essay "The Missing All"<sup>91</sup> summarizes succinctly and eloquently the tremendous influence that World War One exercised on the collective psyche, and the

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<sup>91</sup> The title of Bishop's essay is taken from Emily Dickinson's poem that begins "The missing All prevented me from missing minor things." By borrowing Emily Dickinson's poem for a title of his study on post-World War One fiction, Bishop is directly demonstrating Marcel Raymond's theory on the dissolution of the parallel between Christianity and the work of art. Raymond claims that after a certain day and age, the two can no longer coexist. Raymond locates this instance more or less around the time of World War One. When Emily Dickinson spoke of "the Missing All", she meant the God of her fathers, the God of Christianity. Bishop, in turn, used the phrase to signal the loss of not merely the image of God but a whole way of life that had been the heritage of Classical Christianity. Owing to the senseless annihilation of human life and the loss of innocence which the war brought about, this heritage was clearly crumbling.

ways in which it influenced literature. Even though Bishop was referring to the situation of American letters, his words can very well be applied to the situation in France. Writes Bishop,

The most tragic thing about the war was not that it made so many dead men, but that it destroyed the tragedy of death. Not only did the young suffer in the war, but every abstraction that would have sustained and given dignity to their suffering. The war made the traditional morality unacceptable; it did not annihilate it; it revealed its immediate inadequacy. So that at its end the survivors were left to face, as they could, a world without values.<sup>92</sup>

Of course, Bardamu, a typical young and rash volunteer, cannot be expected to express himself in such sophisticated terms. Instead, he would pronounce the simpler but no less poignant, “Vous savez, avant la guerre, on était tous encore bien plus ignorants et plus fats qu’aujourd’hui. On ne savait presque rien des choses du monde en général, enfin des inconscients ... “ (*VaBN*, 97). Through him, we will follow the evolution of a generation changed forever, deprived of its future and condemned to a perpetual rethinking: “A vingt ans je n’avais déjà plus que le passé” (*VaBN*, 120), Bardamu would exclaim a mere twenty pages later. Even though the events of the war are only talked about in the initial hundred or so pages of the novel, their specter would haunt the narration till the end. All forms of ugliness in human behavior and in relationships between human beings, all abuse, brutality and dishonesty would invariably provoke an immediate parallel with the war. For example, at the end of the episode in which the highly unpleasant shopkeeper “corocoro” (he is depicted as constantly scratching himself to alleviate the irritation

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Howe, 63

caused by a horrible skin disease) robs an indigenous man of his *caoutchouc* and trades it for a piece of ribbon, Bardamu is instantly reminded of “les convoys de la guerre”. (*VaBN*, 174). The parallel is far-fetched, yet can be seen in there being a form of bestial injustice that a human being inflicts on a fellow human.

The ways in which the war is depicted in Céline are very different from what they would be in Drieu La Rochelle. Gilles, Drieu’s protagonist, also spends time at the front. However, to him, it seemed less of a mere human folly and more of a heroic and valiant exploit. In *Gilles*, it constitutes the exact opposite of everyday life. By sending his protagonist to the forces, Drieu removes him from the realm of the quotidian and provides him with an opportunity to **transcend** the predicament of ordinary existence. Bardamu, on the other hand, is not offered such an opportunity. Throughout the novel, the reader will have the impression that the war stands for everything which must be feared and avoided in human life.



## VI.

“ J’ai 37 ans, mais je porte en moi, par chromosomes interposés, depuis deux milliards d’années, bien avant nos ancêtres, les grands sauriens, la douleur du monde depuis qu’est apparue, sur notre planète maudite, cette saloperie qu’on appelle un système nerveux central ”, Céline would share with a fellow doctor, Léon Bondoux, in 1931, shortly before he wraps up the writing of his first novel.<sup>93</sup> For all the (uncharacteristic) melodramatic overtones of this statement, it communicates that Céline’s writing was the direct result of observation, depiction, sharing and relating of the human burden. Unfortunately, in the decades after their publication, Céline’s work was more or less interpreted as literature which cannot teach us anything of lasting value. Even as perspicacious of an observer as André Breton dismisses Céline’s fiction as mere literary fireworks and not the sophisticated exercise in contemplation it seems to me to embody: “[J’ai] horreur de cette littérature à *effet* qui très vite doit en passer par la calomnie et la souillure, faire appel à ce qu’il y a de plus bas au monde ”,<sup>94</sup> the Surrealist writer would haughtily claim. Other better-intentioned, yet somewhat superficial statements maintain that “[the] innocent truth for a Céline, until proven otherwise” remains that “life is only ‘lie, copulate and die.’”<sup>95</sup> Still others maintain that Céline’s fiction is an artistic hallucination, incapable of relating to human reality. Critic David Hayman, for example,

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<sup>93</sup> Bondoux, Léon. *Avec Céline dans la forêt morvandelle*. This source is unpaginated.

<sup>94</sup> A. Breton, Réponse à l’enquête “Que pensez-vous du process Céline?”, *Le Libertaire*, 20 janvier 1950

<sup>95</sup> Widmer, 87

states that the “View of life in his novels should not be confused with life ... his message relates principally to his fears rather than to his knowledge.”<sup>96</sup>

It is only at the end of the 1970s that Céline would start receiving the recognition he truly deserves. In the introduction to one of the finest American studies of the author to appear, *Enfin Céline Vint* (1988), critic Wayne Burns states:

I can go as far into Céline’s fictional reality as my perceptions will take me ... to show that Céline’s genius carries him to Santayana’s “absolute grotesque reality”. And at the same time ... this fictional reality is not dreadful at all, ... it is, deep down, as humane and compassionate as fictional reality can very well be – and still maintain its integrity in the face of the rhetoric that is always threatening to engulf it.”<sup>97</sup>

The words of the great Catholic novelist of the interwar years, Georges Bernanos, still apply to *Voyage*: “Pour nous la question n’est pas de savoir si la peinture de M. Céline est atroce, nous demandons si elle est vraie. Elle l’est”.<sup>98</sup> It is this very search for the truth which drives the novel. What’s more, Céline believes this quest to be the most humane one the artist could be engaged in. *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is a novel which would stop at nothing to make the audience see and appreciate what it has to say. Its most idiosyncratic aspect, of course, is its striking language.

Before we delve into an exploration of Céline’s inimitable modes of expression, it is important to address an aspect of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* in general terms. It is clear that the novel is constructed as a reaction to the Realist tradition as exemplified by Zola

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<sup>96</sup> Widmer, 88

<sup>97</sup> Burns, 2

<sup>98</sup> Georges Bernanos, *op. cit.*, 1297

(for whom Louis Ferdinand had boundless admiration). Indeed, the sordid examples of domestic violence we witness in *Voyage* allow us to align Céline with the Naturalism of Zola, one of the few authors whose achievement he was prepared to acknowledge and as influential for his own work.<sup>99</sup> However, the poetics of the Céline novel are very different from those of Naturalist fiction. In *Voyage*, the Naturalist concern with order and detached observation is replaced by a sense of anarchy. Céline's novel makes little effort to conceal its exploitation of artifice. The numerous proper names,<sup>100</sup> for example, frequently take on a surreal appearance, all the while exhibiting their origins in a distortion of our more familiar reality.<sup>101</sup>

The ways in which *Voyage au bout de la nuit* subverts the Naturalist genre deserves some attention. It is clear that the novel has no interest in presenting an embellished or romanticized account of reality but rather, aims at arriving at a cruelly truthful depiction of existence such as it is experienced on a daily basis. However, Céline's own brand of realism is characterized by exaggeration and hyperbole. He skillfully manipulates both the romantic and the realist register, and constantly pits them against each other. Consider, for example, the passage below, the description of the night walks the protagonist takes while waiting for his lover:

Les nuits de Billancourt étaient douces, animées parfois par ces puérides alarmes d'avions et de zeppelins, grâce auxquelles les citadins trouvaient moyen d'éprouver des frissons justificatifs. En attendant mon amante, j'allais me promener, nuit tombée, jusqu'au pont

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<sup>99</sup> Céline, "Hommage à Zola", *HER* 3. 169

<sup>100</sup> For a more detailed discussion of character names in Céline, see Ph. Almeras, "L'Onomastique caricaturale de Louis-Ferdinand Celine," *Revue Internationale d'Onomastique* (July 1971), 161-179.

<sup>101</sup> Tilby, 110

de Grenelle, là où l'ombre monte du fleuve jusqu'au tablier du métro, avec ses lampadaires en chapelets, tendu en plein noir, avec sa ferraille énorme aussi qui va foncer en tonnerre en plein flanc des gros immeubles du quai de Passy. (*VaBN*, 99)

A dark romantic omen lurks on the background and brings a poetic ring into the description. The beginning of this passage can be likened to a poem, and it would be fair to say that certain sections of *Voyage* read more like poetry than prose. (Curiously, for all the harshness of vocabulary and controversial descriptions Céline employed, he essentially saw himself as a poet not a novelist (he considered novelists inferior to poets). As Henri Godard points out, “Il se dit “ plus poète que prosateur.”<sup>102</sup> “Je suis un styliste, un coloriste de mots”, Céline further insists, hastening to underscore the difference between himself and a “ real ” poet such as Mallarmé who, according to Céline, does not use “ des mots de sens extrêmement rare ” but reverts instead to “ des mots usuels, des mots de tous les jours.”<sup>103</sup> However, the gentle melancholy, disappointment in love and general sense of desolation are immediately followed by a typical Célinian turn of phrase. The peaceful mood is brutally checked by a staccato phrase which brings us right back to reality: “Il existe certains coins comme ça dans les villes, si stupidement laids qu'on y est presque toujours seul.” (*VaBN*, 99) Céline does not hesitate to remind us that solitude is the other face of the night, and it invariably sets in, even after the most glorious events in one's life.

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<sup>102</sup> Two examples can be seen in *Cahiers Céline N 2*, 19, 68, 87, and Milton Hindus', *Louis Ferdinand Céline tel que je l'ai vu*, 134, 138.

<sup>103</sup> Letter to Hindus from May 15, 1947. Quoted in Hindus, *Céline tel que je l'ai vu*, 138

The same strategy is employed a little further, and this time, it is not love, but lofty patriotic sentiments which would be painted in a rather dubious light. During a leave in Paris, Bardamu is the guest of honor of a gala at the theatre. His adventures and heroism at the front have inspired a renowned actress, who recites patriotic verse. After the performance, Bardamu is sent off by a thunder of applause. As he heads home alone, he feels elated by the sense of recognition and appreciation he has felt among the audience. However, as he walks home into the night, the emotional high gives way to a stark and unpleasant reality: “ D  separ  , je quittais la Com  die pendant qu’ on   teignait les derniers flambeaux des couloirs et je rejoignis seul, par la nuit, sans tramway, notre h  pital, sourci  re au fond des boues tenaces et des banlieues insoumises ”. (*VaBN*, 127)

As the examples above demonstrate, C  line is constantly trying to shock his reader into recognizing a dim and gruesome reality by juxtaposing it with a glorious event. The style is tailored accordingly. It delivers a stirring account of existence. *Voyage au bout de la nuit* successfully illustrates John Ruskin’s conviction that “[a]ccuracy in proportion to the rightness of the cause, and purity of the emotion, is the possibility of fine art.”<sup>104</sup> C  line is the first writer in the French language who, to put it simply, writes exactly like he speaks. Even though, in retrospect, he would criticize it as being too “well-written,”<sup>105</sup> his rejection of the traditional French distinction between the written and spoken language is clearly established. In his writing, he prepares the ground for a new kind of language retains the flexibility and subtlety of literary expression all the while remaining deeply rooted in the vocabulary and syntax of popular speech. C  line’s use of

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in George Steiner, *Extraterritorial*, 198. Emphasis mine.

<sup>105</sup> See Poulet, 40-42.

language is not a gratuitous rebellion; it is an attempt to prevent stereotyped reactions, to produce in the reader a raw emotional response. The novelist is explicit about this purpose in the Meudon speech of 1933: "Nous travaillons a présent par la sensibilité et non plus par l'analyse, en somme 'du dedans.' Nos mots vont jusqu'aux instincts."<sup>106</sup> Undoubtedly, Céline's infernal sociology had deep roots in his sense of the French language<sup>107</sup>. He used that language with both a sweep and an idiomatic intensity equaled perhaps only by Rabelais and Diderot, both of whom were authors he greatly admired.<sup>108</sup> The style that made *Voyage au bout de la nuit* an event in the history of modern prose is a deafening, nerve-rending barrage, a breathless accumulation of invective, scabrous direct address, slang and colloquial idiom tied together – or rather, put into a loud, fiercely evocative Morse code – by Céline's famous use of dots and dashes instead of regular punctuation. Céline handled the French language like an earthmover, digging deep into

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<sup>106</sup> "Hommage a Zola," *HER* 3, 171.

<sup>107</sup> Among the most notable critics who have provided insight into Céline's writing style are Ph. Almèras, J-L. de Boissieu, J. Borzic, J. Cellard, A. Chesneau, J. Guénot, M. Hanrez, A. Hardy, G. Holtus, A. Julliard, J. Kristeva, G. Laflèche, Y. de la Quèrière, J.-P. Louis, S. Luce, A. Montaut, D. Racelle-Latin, F. Richaudeau, G. Roques, L. Spitzer, M. Thomas, C. Vigneau, F. Vitoux

<sup>108</sup> Céline was reluctant to acknowledge many of his fellow-writers as possible inspirations. He mentioned La Fontaine, Mme de Sevigné, Vallès, Zola and Eugène Dabit. The parallel between Céline and Dabit is unquestionable and essential to the understanding of the Célinian oeuvre. Bardèche (93) likewise underscores the similarities. The comparison with Dabit is provoked by the observation that *Voyage au bout de la nuit* possesses, especially in its second part, the same populist overtones which characterize Dabit's oeuvre. The great difference, as Bardèche would point out, lies in *Voyage's* cruel observation that poor people are no lesser beasts than rich ones. Consequently, all deserve to suffer and live in misery. Poor people are entirely unworthy of sympathy. To like them and feel sorry for them would be a complete waste of time. What's more, Céline himself always claimed that it was Dabit's commercial success which inspired him to try his hand as a writer in his turn.

its argotic traditions<sup>109</sup>, into the raw speech of Parisian slums and hospital wards, into the visceral tonalities of patois, and lifting to the light a trove of words, popular elisions, technical exactitudes left out of view in the habitual decorum and shameliness of the French literary idiom.<sup>110</sup> We chuckle today at critics who, upon the publication of the

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<sup>109</sup> Céline's usage of slang and argot has solicited much attention. It must, however, be said that he was far from being a pioneer in the domain. Hugo's *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné* and *Les Misérables* could be seen as groundbreaking in this respect. Balzac and Eugène Sue play off the exotic effect of the speech of the *la pègre*, the underworld. In a much more realistic and thus more convincing manner, Zola, in *L'Assommoir*, reproduces "la langue du peuple" qui a eu "la curiosité littéraire de ramasser et de couler dans un moule très travaillé" (Emile Zola, préface de *L'Assommoir*). Mallarmé would acknowledge Zola's achievement in which he sees « une admirable tentative linguistique, grâce à laquelle tant de modes d'expression souvent ineptes forges par de pauvres diables prennent la valeur des plus belles formules littéraires puisqu'elles arrivent à nous faire sourire ou presque pleurer, nous lettrés » (Stéphane Mallarmé, lettre du 3 février 1877 à Emile Zola, *Correspondance*, Gallimard, t. II, 146). And as early as 1934, at the time of the Congress of Soviet writers in Moscow, Malraux would identify the following as the greatest challenge faced by French writers at the present moment, "Le problème présent et, me semble-t-il, peu remarqué, de la forme est celui d'un langage parlé, atteignant cependant à la qualité du style ». (Entretien reproduit dans le Cahier de l'Herne *André Malraux*, 1982, 288). Last but not least, in 1964, Aragon would talk about "ce parler syncope, ce français oral, qui est de ma génération" Malraux, *Le mentir-vrai*, Paris : Gallimard, 1980, 13

<sup>110</sup> Regarding his specific usage of argot, Céline would write to Milton Hindus that, to put spoken language into writing is a mere *trick* (Hindus points out that the word comes from the French *truc* which has a similar meaning – fooling someone.) To quote Céline's letter:

*I found it (the trick) – nobody else. Making spoken words go into literature isn't stenography: you have to change the sentences and rhythms somehow, to distort them – to use an artifice, so that when you read a book, it's as though someone is actually speaking to you. That's brought about by transposing each word, which never seems to be exactly the one you're expecting – but a little surprise. ... The same thing happens as with a stick plunged into water. If you want it to look straight you have to break it slightly*

novel, pleaded against its revolutionary style and regarded it as a weakness: “ La force de propulsion et de destruction du livre eut été, je crois, bien plus grande si l’auteur avait gardé un ton plus modéré, plus classique. ”<sup>111</sup> Céline restored to the novel what it lacked in the hands of Gide and Proust, what it had possessed in Zola – a frank physicality<sup>112</sup>.

The question which arises here, then, is also the one we have been trying to answer throughout this study. This is a highly disturbing work of art, yet one which moves us deeply. I’d like to argue that the reason why this is the case is because it is a work of art, which allows us an experience both true to real life and one allowing us to

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– or *bend* it, you might say. When you put one end in, a normally straight stick looks bent  
– and the same with language. On the page, the liveliest dialogue taken down word for word seems flat, complicated, heavy ... [all emphases original’s]

<sup>111</sup> André Billy’s appraisal of *Voyage*. As quoted in *Romans*, t. I, 1269

<sup>112</sup> Charles Krance goes as far as to suggest that *Voyage au bout de la nuit* had been a major inspiration for none other than Sartre’s *La Nausée*. The epigraph of *La Nausée* (“C’est un garçon sans importance, c’est tout juste un individu”), as is widely known, was indeed taken from Céline’s 1933 play *L’Eglise*. Subsequently, Sartre would go on to claim that he had not actually read the play and was thus oblivious to its anti-Semitic undertones. Krance’s article titled “Louis Ferdinand Céline: Just an individual”, argues that the manuscript of the virtually unknown young writer and philosopher (Sartre) was initially rejected by Gallimard in 1936, and subsequently revised. When it was accepted a year later in April of 1937, it bore the traces of “a discernible Célinian influence, namely, a vocabulary which was suddenly and violently liberated from the literary proprieties that for nearly four centuries had dominated literary production in France” (OR, 1666). A similar view is presented in Kingsley Widmer’s 1968 article “The Way Down to Wisdom of Louis-Ferdinand Céline”. In addition to the influence Céline had on Sartre, Widmer claims, he was also instrumental to Henry Miller. The latter was revisiting *Tropic of Cancer* in Paris and was directly influenced by “Céline’s foray into new depths of the autobiographical novel of despair and outrage” (Widmer: 85). Guenot puts it even more succinctly, talking about Céline’s influence on the future generations of writers in his biography of Céline: “Il est arrivé sur une île déserte avant lui et entièrement occupée après sa mort » (Guenot, 29)



experience existence on a completely different level. There is no doubt that Céline's manhandling of the French language grants an extra degree of veracity to the novel. The writer shared Jean-Paul Sartre's stance, spelled out in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, that art is the only domain in which the human being can truly be free. In this section, then, I would like to focus on the ways in which the Célinian narrative conveys the truth about the human condition and inspires the readers to reflect upon it themselves.

The one thing Céline insisted upon throughout his life was, his desire to paint reality while refusing to preach and be a moralist. "To hell with morality, give me beauty", he would tell Milton Hindus.<sup>113</sup> (This categorical dismissal of morality as category reminds one of Nabokov's no less unconditional refusal to adhere to be referred to as a moralist writer). Even though Céline crafted elaborate descriptions of depravity and degeneration, he was horrified at the thought of using his novels and pamphlets as a didactic platform.<sup>114</sup> What's more, he did not think mankind took to teaching, and considered his reader a fickle individual, incapable of and refusing to think for himself. He constantly insisted that he had no faith in his fellow men: "I don't believe in mankind," he declared, recognizing that this lack of faith constituted his chief offense against conventional morality. "All is allowed by man except *lack of faith in mankind*."<sup>115</sup> As the preface to *Guignol's band*, a later novel, demonstrates, to the author, the

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<sup>113</sup> Hindus, 91-2. Céline would also go on to claim that "all art is the translation of the lines of the dancer's legs."

<sup>114</sup> The reading public was far from accepting that he was not trying to preach. In England, for example, Céline was seen as an "aged Tolstoy crying out against copulation and the propagation of the race" (Buckley, 5)

<sup>115</sup> In "Letter to Elie Faure" [ca. 1943], in *HER* 3, 24

audience's reactions are always predictable, short-lived and shallow: " Ca vocifère et puis ça se calme. Ils aiment jamais ce qu'on leur présente. Ca leur fait mal ! ... Oh là youyoue ! ... ou c'est trop long ! ... ça les ennuye ! ... toujours quelque chose ! ... C'est jamais ça et puis d'un coup ils en raffolent ! " (GB, 10).

Similarly, in Céline's controversial pamphlet *Mea Culpa*, we read, " There is no system by which he [Man] can be trained. He always manages to make his getaway from the controls somehow. ... What an expert he is in doing just that! Anyone who could catch him in the act would be clever! And then, who gives a damn? Life is too short as it is!"<sup>116</sup> But more than anything, Céline refused to preach because, in his opinion, this was a hypocritical occupation. He believed that those who instruct others how to live do so in order to eschew assuming responsibility for their own existence and deflect attention from their own wrongdoings. "To talk morals entails no responsibility. That's a pose, a good front to put on. A preacher is on every dunghill."<sup>117</sup> His antidote for such an attitude was a poignant, powerful and memorable narrative, carried out in scathing, vitriolic vocabulary and stripped bare of any unnecessary sugarcoating of reality, which would provoke the reader to examine and reevaluate his own existence.

Erika Ostrovsky, a perspicacious critic and author of the first comprehensive study of Céline's life and works in English, sums up *Voyage's* inspiration by insisting that: "To understand, to probe beneath the surface of things, even at the price of turning

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<sup>116</sup> Louis Ferdinand Céline, *Mea Culpa and The Life and Work of Semmelweis*, trans. R. Parker (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1937), 12. Emphasis mine. A similar point of view is expressed in a letter to Milton Hindus from the 1940s: "I don't broadcast messages to the world ... not me, no sir! I do not clutter up the air with my thoughts" [*Correspondence*, 14]

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

the scalpel against oneself without pity, this is the real quest for Céline, and of his protagonists.”<sup>118</sup> At the same time, however, the narrative shows instances in which the disturbing aspects of reality reveal a deep humanity. In what is one of the finest studies in English yet to appear, Merlin Thomas acknowledges the human and compassionate aspect of Céline’s oeuvres. “Books and articles often allude to disgust, despair, nausea, even lunacy, when referring to Céline, but much more rarely to the fact that he had the most intense and sincere views about what constitutes beauty, grace, delicacy, kindness, humanity.”<sup>119</sup> There is no denying that the Célinian narrative is often loaded with descriptions that allow us to classify his outlook as negative to the outmost. Yet they manage to convey the hopelessness and ugliness of daily existence in a perfect way. The writer himself acknowledges that he derived no pleasure as he went about crafting these descriptions: “Je ne suis pas heureux de voir mes frères à l’état de cochons sournois, lâches et sadiques. Je les préférerais un peu verticaux et décents ”<sup>120</sup>. If he writes and exposes mankind in its most horrifying and undignified aspects, it is out of compassion and not out of anger. The stark negativity, which constitutes the most immediately discernible aspect of the novel, is counterbalanced by instances of contemplation which allow one to observe reality in a calm and objective manner : “ Tout ce que j’ai écrit c’était pour que[les gens] n’aillent pas à l’abattoir, pour qu’ils ne soient pas saignés comme des veaux, comme des cons. Et maintenant, s’ils pouvaient me hacher, me débiter ! ... ”<sup>121</sup> Céline understands the artist’s responsibility as the imperative to depict

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<sup>118</sup> Ostrovsky, 93

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, 236

<sup>120</sup> Monnier, 16-7

<sup>121</sup> *HER* 3, 75

the truth, even though sometimes entails revealing shocking and unpleasant truths about the human condition<sup>122</sup>. Much like Proust, he sees the process of writing as an endeavor aimed at fighting oblivion and awakening in the reader an understanding of the past which may help make sense of previous experiences:

La grande défaite, en tout, c'est d'oublier, et surtout ce qui vous a fait crever, et de crever sans comprendre jamais jusqu'au quel point les homes sont vaches. Quand on sera au bord du trou faudra pas faire les malins nous autres mais faudra pas oublier non plus, faut raconter tout sans changer un mot, de ce qu'on a vu de plus vicieux chez les hommes, et puis poser sa chique et puis descendre. Ca suffit comme boulot pour une vie tout entière.  
(*VaBN*, 32)

Contrary to those who claimed that he created scandal for scandal's sake, Céline's mode of expression was directly influenced by the very specificity of his subject matter. Once again, it can be traced back to his war experiences: "Quiconque tenait une plume à ce moment-là [après la guerre] s'est trouvé dans l'obligation de reconquérir sa propre langue, de le rejeter à la forge. Les mots les plus surs étaient pipés. Les plus grands

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<sup>122</sup> In this respect, the writer is not unlike a physician, whose purpose it is to cure sickness. "Ma véritable vocation était de soigner et de guérir ... La fin d'un coryza, voilà ma plus grande satisfaction," Jean Monnier remembers him saying. (Similarly, William Burroughs would insist that the purpose of *Naked Lunch* was to delineate the symptoms of a sickness.) However, interested in people and sympathetic to their plight as he was, Céline rarely felt **pity** for his fellow man. He took great pride in being able to see things as they were. Philippe Alméras tells an anecdote about the author's taking Elizabeth Craig and a friend of hers to see Isadora Duncan at the Théâtre Mogador. Way past her prime, and "double in size" because of her drinking, she nonetheless solicits the reverence and the admiration on the art of the two dancers. Céline, on the other hand, is far from moved. He escorts the two young women quickly as soon as the performance is over: "L'horreur enrobée de nostalgie, il ne supporte pas", Alméras concludes. (Alméras: 102-3)

étaient vides, claquaient dans la main”, Céline shares with Frederic Lefèvre.<sup>123</sup> Henri Godard points out that Céline’s writing incarnates the contemporary idea that the highest form of *engagement* is demonstrated by the choice of artistic forms and the language used.<sup>124</sup>

Céline felt compelled to invent his own type of writing, his own kind of novel, because he felt that literature had become incapable of relating reality in an adequate manner. Dominique de Roux and Michel Thelia point out that, “ Avec Proust<sup>125</sup>, [Céline] est le second grand écrivain français à avoir répudié complètement l’emploi d’un langage innocent ”,<sup>126</sup> a point of view, essentially shared by novelist Michel Tournier.<sup>127</sup> At the

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<sup>123</sup> Interview avec Frédéric Lefèvre, (See Bernanos, *Ecrits de combat*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, t. I, 1040)

<sup>124</sup> Godard, *La poétique de Céline*, 208

<sup>125</sup> The similarities and contrasts between Proust and Céline have been the object of a number of thorough studies. The latter have explored the linguistic, stylistic, thematic etc similarities between the two authors. For the sake of brevity, let us quote just one rather short but extremely concise and illuminating account of the two radically opposite approaches to literature the two writers represent. As Henri Godard observes,

Céline se situe aux antipodes de Proust. Les deux sensibilités et les deux projets ne sont pas sans points communs, mais, dans l’écriture, là où Proust exploite jusqu’à ses limites la tendance de l’écrit à la liaison, Céline lutte contre elle. Proust travaille à réunir dans la même structure le plus grand nombre possible de mots et d’actes de prédication ; l’effort et le plaisir du lecteur consistent alors à saisir la relation posée entre les termes les plus disjoints, à conserver jusqu’au bout, à travers tant de niveaux d’emboîtements, le sens d’une construction unique, à ne jamais perdre, au fil des subordonnées et des parenthèses, le sentiment de son centre de gravité. Céline, au terme d’un travail moins poussé mais inverse, fait parcourir une succession d’éléments qui n’ont plus entre eux, deux à deux ou presque, que la liaison la plus tenue et la plus immédiate. L’unité à saisir est celle, dynamique, d’une voix qui parle (Godard, *La poétique de Céline*, 182-3)

<sup>126</sup> *HER* 3, p 2. Céline’s particular mode of expression, however, was not always acknowledged for its shock value and was even considered a weakness by some: “La force de propulsion et de destruction du

risk of invoking a loaded term, extremely dangerous in a discussion of French literature, we should nonetheless state that by choosing to craft a novel, characterized by extreme realism, Céline demonstrated his participation in his day and age. To put it in Alain Robbe-Grillet's terms : “ Au lieu d'être de nature politique, l'engagement c'est, pour l'écrivain, la pleine conscience des problèmes actuels de son propre langage, la conviction de leur extrême importance, la volonté de les résoudre de l'intérieur ”.<sup>128</sup> Roland Barthes, in 1977, makes a strikingly similar claim : “ Les forces de liberté qui sont dans la littérature ne dépendent pas de la personne civile, de l'engagement politique de l'écrivain (...) ni même du contenu doctrinal de son œuvre, mais du travail de déplacement qu'il exerce sur la langue : de ce point de vue, Céline est tout aussi important que Hugo, Chateaubriand que Zola ”<sup>129</sup>.

In response to the 1960 *Tel Quel* survey which asked various writers, “Do you think you are a gifted writer”, Céline writes, “Hedonists don't need to write. Asking such a question of a writer? You write because you are unhappy. Your world devours everything else. You're completely alone. **And sustained by style.** Poets have no inner life. Writers are usually babblers”.<sup>130</sup> Style being the only thing which sustains the

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livre eut été, je crois, bien plus grande si l'auteur avait gardé un ton plus modéré, plus classique”, writes critic André Billy shortly after the publication of the novel. See André Billy, *Romans*, t. I, 1269

<sup>127</sup> Tournier considered Proust and Céline “the two greatest [French] novelists of the Twentieth century” See Tournier, *op.cit.*, 80.

<sup>128</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 46-47

<sup>129</sup> R. Barthes, *Leçon inaugurale de la chaire de sémiotique littéraire*, 12

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in *Cahiers Céline 2: Céline et l'actualité littéraire*, 168. Emphasis mine. Céline was harshly dismissive of the writers who were excessively verbose (he called them “babblers”), as well as that which he called “la littérature à messages”. The authors associated with the Nouveau roman were the target of his

artwork, it should come as no surprise Céline upheld his conviction that literature and art in general should not serve an extrinsic purpose, and that the true value of the artwork is lost once it becomes subject to “messages”. As we have seen already, he abhorred the “literature of messages”, and his goal is rather to rationalize the language “so that it pulses more than it reasons”, as he told Irwing Howe.<sup>131</sup> He would go as far as to claim that his writing was **devoid of** any ideas and relied solely on emotional content:<sup>132</sup> ” J'ai

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irony. Charles Krance quotes him, ridiculing in front of an interviewer, those “that say they discovered a new novel – and that the latest masterpiece is something called ‘La Robe sur le gril’ or ‘La Robe Grillée’ – undoubtedly a story of witchcraft ... and torture ... with broomsticks ... gridirons ... all typically Western ingredients. Obviously ... we have not yet gotten out of the Middle Ages” (Krance: 176)

<sup>131</sup> Howe, 195

<sup>132</sup> Céline’s highly metaphorical accounts of what the true writer’s style must consist of are widely quoted and deserve to be mentioned here, even if they have no direct bearing on our present discussion. He coined two terms which explain his outlook on his own writing – “lacework” and “emotive subway”. Lacework stands for the author’s supplying only the core of the actions described. In doing so, he leaves lacunae and unspoken details, which the reader needs to work through himself. The emotive subway refers to the manner in which the writer arrives at the narrative. Similarly to the subway, the shortest route is usually underground route. “In 1947, a year after the completion of *Guignol's Band*, he states in a letter to Milton Hindus: “Il y a deux façons de traverser Paris (ou New York) l'une en surface, par auto, vélo, a pied, etc. Alors on se cogne partout, on s'arrête partout (. . .) puis il y a l'autre façon qui consiste a prendre le métro (underground) d'aller alors directement à son but.” The trick for a writer, says Céline, is to capture the pandemonium of the surface streets yet convey it with the directness of a subway route. In *Entretiens avec le Professeur Y*, Céline elaborates: “Moi, je capture toute l'émotion! . . . toute l'émotion dans la surface!(. . .) je la fourre dans le métro! . . . mon métro! . . . tous les autres écrivains sont morts!(. . .) ils pourrissent a la surface”; “jamais le moindre arrêt nulle part!” Céline then mixes metaphorical registers, stating that his “subway” should plunge through the reader's nervous system (the nervous system being a circulatory network roughly analogous to the Paris metro): “Il faut s'enfoncer dans le système nerveux, dans l'émotion et y demeurer jusqu'à l'arrivée au but” (*HER* 3, 112).

pas d'idées moi! aucune! et je trouve rien de plus vulgaire, de plus commun, de plus dégoûtant que les idées!; je suis qu'un petit inventeur, Monsieur!(. . .) le langage écrit était à sec, c'est moi qu'ai redonné l'émotion au langage écrit! (. . .) C'est infime mais c'est quelque chose ”.<sup>133</sup>

But most importantly, Céline's language was a reflection of the artist's dilemma in the face of a very real problem which arose in the war and the post-war years – how does a writer survive as an artist and thinker in a time period in which everyone is trying to make themselves heard:

Céline est ça, entre autres : menteur de village rusé, bon agenceur de la crédulité, il flaire l'époque ; il a le coup de tarin et le coup de sabord, le nez et l'œil. Il écrit comme il le fait à une époque où la radio prend son essor et redonne prestige et puissance à la parole. Elle gonfle des orateurs doués, Adolf Hitler, Charles De Gaulle, qui devront leur accès au pouvoir à leur éloquence retransmise par des hauts-parleurs, avec des différences de mérite politique, évidemment<sup>134</sup>.

The language of great leaders is essentially what Céline rebels against in his fiction. Having gotten to know, firsthand, the reality of the front and having been able to compare it to the way in which it had been represented in civil society, the writer was immensely disappointed by the disparities between the two. *Voyage* mocks cruelly the inflated empty phrases of his day and age. At the mental hospital he is sent to after his breakdown, Bardamu speaks of the patriotic discourses the head doctor holds on a daily basis. He sarcastically observes,

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<sup>133</sup> In *Interviews avec Prof. Y*, 19, 22-23

<sup>134</sup> Guenot, 82



Il m'était difficile de trouver plus fort, d'ajouter quelque chose encore à de telles outrances, et cependant personne à l'hôpital ne se résignait, c'était à qui parmi nous, saisi d'émulation, inventerait à qui mieux mieux d'autres "belles pages guerrières" où figurer sublimement. Nous vivions un grand roman de geste, dans la peau de personnages fantastiques, au fond desquels, dérisoires, nous tremblions de tout le contenu de nos viandes et de nos âmes". (*VaBN*, 124)

He had seen this rhetoric abused to such an extent as to render all notions of nobility and heroism cheap and trivial. Branledore, a man with whom he shares a room at the hospital, abuses it in order to make himself well-liked and extract benefits from the hospital personnel: "Alors entre deux étouffements s'il y avait un médecin ou une infirmière à passer par là : "Victoire ! Victoire ! Nous aurons la Victoire !" criait Branledore, ou le murmurait du bout ou de la totalité de ses poumons selon le cas. Ainsi rendu conforme à l'ardente littérature agressive, par un effet d'opportunité mise en scène, il jouissait de la plus haute cote morale". (*VaBN*, 113) It seems to me that one of the most compelling aspects of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* lies in the skillful manner in which rhetoric is becomes deflated and the quotidian – valorized and celebrated.

## VII.

The true artist who has felt the burden of existence and confronted it with eyes and senses wide open eventually manages to surmount his horror in the face of dark, oppressive reality. (Here, I use “horror” much in the way in which it was employed in another great narrative of a nightmarish journey – Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*). All the novels under analysis in this study are retrospective narratives attempting to reflect upon, justify and explain past events. By traveling back in time, the writer is capable to re-evaluate the past, see the relationship between events and adorn them with meaning which they did not previously seem to possess. This urge to rethink the past, which reached its apogee with Proust, is essentially a nineteenth-and-twentieth-century prerogative. Roland Barthes points out in *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, that the drive to reevaluate the past proves essential to the experience of the writer after the 1850s. Claims Barthes, “ Aux temps bourgeois (c’est à dire classiques et romantiques), la forme ne pouvait être déchirée puisque la conscience ne l’était pas. Au contraire, dès l’instant où l’écrivain a cessé d’être un témoin de l’universel pour devenir une conscience malheureuse (vers 1850), son premier geste a été de choisir l’engagement de sa forme, soit en assumant, soit en refusant l’écriture de son passé. ”<sup>135</sup>

Where the paradigm of a past rethought and re-organized becomes compelling for the reader is in the finished result. Great literature constructs a reality which stands in stark contrast to everyday existence primarily because, unlike our quotidian, **it makes**

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<sup>135</sup> Barthes, *Degré Zéro*. op.cit., 8

**sense.** The artwork allows us to become engulfed in and experience a paradigm of perfect congruence and unity, one in which everything comes together and creates a sense of uninterrupted totality. It is precisely this notion of unity, of disparate aspects suddenly coming together in and forming a congruent whole which characterizes the artwork and transforms it into the *par excellence* antipode of conventional human existence. The latter notion has come to us through the writings of Georg Lukacs, for example. In his *Heidelberger Asthetik*, the Hungarian thinker explains that the artwork means that there is a world, there is a complete, harmonic, self-contained, high-spirited totality. This is a kind of utopian world which corresponds in all of its aspects to our reality of longing and appetite. Consequently, Lukacs would claim, all art corresponds to a necessity, to a deep suffering of the humanity. As we saw in the experiences of soul-searching and anguish which characterize the night, reality is frequently insufferable. Yet it constitutes the necessary right of passage through which one gains access to the higher form of existence characterized by the artwork.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> I evoke here Lukacs's analysis on the phenomenality of artworks. According to the Hungarian thinker, artworks were characterized by their *facticity*. The passage in the original German reads as follows:

Das Werk bedeutet, dass es eine Welt gibt, dass es eine vollkommene harmonische, in sich abgeschlossene, beglückende Totalität gibt. Es ist eine Art utopischer Welt, die in allem unserer sehnsuchsvollen, verlangenden Wirklichkeit entspricht. [...] Jede Kunst entspricht einem Bedürfnis, einem tiefen Leiden der Menschheit- und diese Leiden der Menschheit entspricht dem Objektiven, der empirisch sich selbst und uns unangemessenen Welt [...]. (Lukacs, op. cit., 233)

Henri Godard, author of the most comprehensive study<sup>137</sup> on Céline's writing style, claims that

[n]ous reconnaissons une œuvre forte au sentiment de **nécessité** qu'elle nous donne. Alors que, dans l'expérience commune du langage, une même pensée peut toujours être dite de plusieurs façons, voici soudain un texte, quelle que soit sa longueur, auquel on ne saurait imaginer de rien changer sans altérer l'ensemble ou même le détruire. Mots et message ne font plus qu'un. Ils sont liés par une telle abondance et une telle complexité de rapports que le texte en prend une connaissance aussi forte dans son domaine que celle d'un objet naturel. Dans le travail de l'écrivain, il s'est à certain point produit une cristallisation qui a multiplié à l'infini échos et mises en relations, donnant ainsi à l'œuvre son pouvoir.<sup>138</sup>

Thus, the work of art operates as an antithesis to everyday existence and fulfills a function previously carried out by religion. Céline belongs to a literary tradition which developed after the nineteenth century and which explored the question of how one lived in a God-less world. In his classic study on modern poetry titled *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, Marcel Raymond insists that, for centuries, people attained a blissful dissociation from everyday existence through church rituals. However, as the church lost its hold on the general population (Raymond would situate that following the 1850s), it was poetry which became a sort of irregular instrument of metaphysical knowledge and inspiration.

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<sup>137</sup> Other notable contributors include Ph. Almèras, J-L. de Boissieu, J. Borzic, J. Cellard, A. Chesneau, J. Guénot, M. Hanrez, A. Hardy, G. Holtus, A. Julliand, J. Kristeva, G. Laflèche, Y. de la Quèrièrè, J.-P. Louis, S. Luce, A. Montaut, D. Racelle-Latin, F. Richaudeau, G. Roques, L. Spitzer, M. Thomas, C. Vigneau, F. Vitoux

<sup>138</sup> Godard, 9-10

An explosion of the irrational elements in the human personality had occurred in the era of The Counter Reformation and Baroque art, but at the time the Church had determined the course of the mystical upsurge without much difficulty. Two centuries later, after the critique of the “philosophers”, she was no longer in the same commanding position. It was the task of art (but not of art alone) to gratify some of the human demands that religion had thus far been able to exorcise

From then on poetry tended to become an ethic or some sort of irregular instrument of metaphysical knowledge. Poets were obsessed by the need to “change life”, as Rimbaud puts it, to change man and to bring him in direct contact with existence. The novelty lies less in the fact than in the intention, which gradually emerges from the realm of the unconscious, of re-conquering man’s irrational powers and of transcending the dualism of the self and the universe.<sup>139</sup>

Much like the rest of the novels we will be considering, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was inspired by the desperation which life provokes in the thinking individual. Céline the artist found himself so oppressed by everyday existence, which he observed closely, that he had no choice **but to write**. Much like the mystic who embarks upon a journey culminating in ecstasy, and who must necessarily repudiate ordinary existence, Céline proclaimed vehement hatred and outrage at the way most people live their lives. However, this raging negation is only the beginning of the journey. It is superseded by contemplation and reflection upon the very same disturbing human condition. In *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, the passages expressing vehement rejection alternate with others, in

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<sup>139</sup> Raymond, 5

which the narrator contemplates the reality and the dreadful predicament of existence. It is an exercise which heightens understanding and allows to see the world more clearly. The reader has the impression that Bardamu embraces the wretchedness and desolation and rejoices in describing every sordid little detail. Instead of repulsing us, however, this narrative fascinates and seduces us. In it, we are surrounded by perfect horror. We are spared nothing and every element is in complete harmony with the rest of the elements. Céline's observations were driven by his desire to, as he shared with Robert Poulet, "exprimer les êtres et les faits aussi naturellement que possible" He would confess that on the page, he aspired towards rendering "seulement le sentiment pur ... c'est à dire presque toujours le sentiment abominable, le sentiment défendu ... les choses qu'on éprouvait et qu'on ne pouvait pas avouer".<sup>140</sup> For this reason, it is life Bardamu will celebrate, for he has realized that it is always **worth living**. And it is this conclusion which the reader walks away with which constitutes the biggest "tremblement de terre sur le palais de carton de la civilisation"<sup>141</sup> the novel instigates.

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<sup>140</sup> Poulet, 75-76

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

# **The Individual in Society: An Eternal Problem Revisited**

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's *Gilles* (1939)

## **I.**

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle erupted on the World War One literary scene in France as a man of exceptional promise. Unlike most aspiring writers, he did not have to wait long for his voice to be heard, nor go through the usual tortuous efforts to achieve prominence. The publication of his first collection of war poems, *Interrogation* (1917), rendered him famous overnight. Acclaimed by critics and readers alike, Drieu was hailed as the first soldier-poet to finally break the profound silence in which the front-line combatants were immersed. One of the very few surviving writers of the generation to be twenty-one in 1914, he wore the halo of the authentic soldier. What's more, his bravery was confirmed by the official decorations and citations he had received. Immediately after the end of the

war, Drieu would likewise benefit from the attention justly devoted to the first literary efforts of the “sacrificed generation.”<sup>142</sup>

It will be no exaggeration to say that, after this indisputable success, it all went downhill for him in the 1920s. Drieu La Rochelle made a series of unfortunate choices in his personal and professional life, which put him out of favor with the public opinion.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Grover, 4. The actual phrase was coined by Charles Péguy (1873-1914), poet, socialist, editor of *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. Péguy, who died at the battle of the Marne, is a hero from World War One. However, he used the term “sacrificed generation” in an address titled “O flags of the past”, written in 1909, and pertaining to the generation following the 1870 war. The notion was appropriated anachronistically by literary critics to designate the generation Drieu and Céline belonged to. It addresses many of the fears ordinary soldiers as well as intellectuals who took part in the war, shared. “O flags of the past” provides such an apt illustration of the existential crisis which war veterans face that passage “sacrificed generation’ comes from deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

We are a sacrificed generation. We are not only conquered, that would be nothing. There are glorious defeats, sounding disasters, more fixed, better preservers of glory, finer, more accepted, more commemorated than any triumph. But our defeat is the worst of all, an obscure defeat; we shall not even be despised, we shall be ignored, perhaps we shall be grotesque. There are defeats—Waterloo was one—which more than victories are fixed in the memories of man, in the common memory of humanity. We shall be niggards, we shall be little, we shall be ordinary, we shall be mediocre; or rather we shall not be at all. Nobody will notice us. We shall pass unperceived. . . . We shall never be great; we shall never be known; we shall never be written of. (Quoted by Richard Aldington, “From London: Death of a French Poet.” In *Poetry*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Dec., 1914), pp. 144-146)

<sup>143</sup> Drieu La Rochelle announced his conversion to fascism in 1934. When Jacques Doriot founded the PPF in 1936, Drieu became one of its leading members. He wrote two books and scores of newspaper articles in behalf of Doriot and his party. In 1937, he proudly declared that “Jacques Doriot and our comrades are of the opinion that I have captured the spirit of the Party in an exact fashion.” (See Drieu La Rochelle, *Avec Doriot*, 7) As Robert Soucy reminds us, during the German Occupation, Drieu actively collaborated with the Nazis. With the departure of Gide, Malraux, and others from France's most prestigious literary journal,



In a way, remarkably similar to Céline's, he gradually became alienated from his contemporaries, ending up a *persona non grata* in French literature for several decades. A lot of these problematic choices and decisions wound their way into *Gilles*, the novel under analysis in this chapter. However, the present study attempts to discuss the literary work while making as few references as possible to the real events which might have inspired it. While I cannot deny that the book openly flirts with the autobiographical genre, attributing much of its content to Drieu's personal experience would, in my opinion, result in an erroneously over simplistic reading. Yet as determined as we may be to avoid explaining a novel through its author's life, it is imperative that two biographical details be mentioned, for they are helpful in understanding the particular difficulties one encounters as one attempts to understand and evaluate Drieu La Rochelle's oeuvre.

Starting with the mid-1930s, Drieu increasingly manifested his strong pro-Nazi sympathies. His problematic political stance was the reason why his contemporaries preferred to classify as a misguided publicist and neglect the merits of his literary oeuvre. This attitude was especially pronounced in the late 1940s and 1950s. Drieu was not referred to as a writer. Instead, he was assigned the pejorative qualification of a "figure from the first half of the century." The importance of his literary works was consciously downplayed. Yet Drieu La Rochelle's oeuvre is extremely important to the understanding of the tumultuous decades which followed World War One. One of his earliest biographers, the Belgian critic Pol Vandromme points out that when, in the end of the

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*La Nouvelle Revue française*, Drieu became its editor. During the war, he published a score of articles in the  *NRF*, as well as avowedly fascist journals such as *L'Emancipation nationale*, *Je suis partout*, and *Revolution nationale*. These writings caused a good many of his countrymen, both then and later, to accuse him of opportunism and treason. (Soucy, 71)

1950s, he was asked to write an essay on Drieu, it was for a collection which focused on “les témoins du siècle.”<sup>144</sup> Vandromme found it particularly challenging to elucidate that there were, in fact, two aspects to Drieu’s testimony of his day and age. The two had to be balanced against each other constantly. On the one hand, Drieu was an outspoken pro-Nazi intellectual. On the other, he was an artist. As such, he was drawn to the glorious and romanticized aspects of the ideology. “Le romantisme fasciste,”<sup>145</sup> as critic Paul Serant has called it invoked a union of “politics and aesthetics.”<sup>146</sup> This is the reason why it was extremely appealing to the creative sensibility. However, the difficulty to distinguish the political from the artistic has proven rather hard to surmount. As a result, today, there is a relative lack of critical interpretation of those aspects of Drieu’s work which do not stem directly from his controversial political stance. While the present study cannot but acknowledge that a great part of *Gilles* is directly inspired from its author’s questionable political predilections, it also attempts to come up with a reading which goes beyond Drieu’s ethically problematic collaboration during the Second World War.

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<sup>144</sup> Vandromme, 15

<sup>145</sup> Serant, *Le Romantisme fasciste*, title page, op. cit. Paul Serant points out that the Romanticism inherent in Fascist ideology was one of the main reasons why literary intellectuals such as Robert Brasillach, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Alphonse de Chateaubriant, Abel Bonnard and Lucien Rebatet were likewise attracted by the movement.

<sup>146</sup> Tucker, 606. Thus, according to Tucker, Robert Brasillach of the pro-fascist journal, *Je suis partout*, described fascism as a kind of “poetry” and claimed that he was enchanted by “poetic” images of Hitler youth around campfires, mass meetings at Nuremberg, and heroic moments of the past. Without a doubt, there is a good deal of truth to this portrait of French fascism and its mystique. For a more in-depth study, see Serant, op.cit, 10, 31; Eugen Weber, *op.cit.*, 138-142; Remond, op.,cit., 217; Tucker, op.cit., 605-617.

To complicate matters further, Drieu put an end to his own life in 1945, after two unsuccessful attempts, his suicide solicited no small amount of morbid fascination. Few have resisted the desire to link his tragic end and his problematic ethical choices. Thus, once again, it seems that a greater accent has been put on his life and the focus – taken away from his oeuvre. The magazine *Défense de l'Occident* from February 1958 provides an eloquent illustration. The issue was devoted of the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Drieu's death. Thirteen of the contemporaries who had known him while he was alive, were asked to share their thoughts on why he was a man worthy of commemoration. Of the thirteen, only two actually focus on his legacy as an **author**. The remaining eleven choose instead to dwell at length upon the reasons either for his problematic political choices, or his tragic end. As Bernard Frank puts it rather aptly, "En avalant son luminal, Drieu n'avait pas tant réussi sa mort ... mais plutôt rendu un rude service à ses livres. »<sup>147</sup>

The rhetoric surrounding Drieu is thus one of reasoning out, explanation, justification of the striking aspects of his biography. The bulk of the criticism devoted to *Gilles* is carried out along similar lines owing to the novel's autobiographical nature. *Gilles* is likewise the one book (among some thirty others) which most deserving of critical attention. It is a pity that it has been pigeon-holed as just a Fascist novel, for it achieves much more than depict someone of such political convictions.<sup>148</sup> It traces the journey of its protagonist through more than three decades of French and European history. It paints a poignant and truthful picture of its day and age. This magnum opus constitutes a significant achievement in a time period when almost all major French

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<sup>147</sup> Frank, 59

<sup>148</sup> One scholar described *Gilles* as "the most complete portrait in fiction of the moral and intellectual development of a French fascist." (See Corrigan, 203.)

writers are engaged in a conscious effort to rethink the events of their tumultuous youth and come to terms with the historical cataclysms which shaped their sensibility. This journey through literary and intellectual history would be incomplete without *Gilles*.

Drieu La Rochelle was only too aware of the responsibility he had as an author. It is no coincidence that his protagonist would exclaim, in front of his revered tutor, Carentan, « Il faut absolument que je m'arrange avec mon époque. » (G, 160)<sup>149</sup> All critics and historians who deserve the credit for redeeming the author from the relative obscurity and isolation resulting from his unfortunate political affiliations - authors such as Pierre Andreu, Frédéric Grover, Bernard Frank, Jacques Lecarme, to name but just a few, place a particular emphasis on Drieu's desire to leave a mark and make his voice heard. This is an urge and a vocation Drieu started expressing quite early in his writing career. At eighteen, he notes in his journal: « J'ai l'impression que quelque part, il existe, à mon nom, comme plusieurs types d'hommes, de vie, que je pourrais réaliser, les uns aussi bien que les autres.»<sup>150</sup> Thus, it would be fair to discern, in the extremely complex and multi-faceted persona of Gilles, an attempt to explore the ways in which these « plusieurs types d'hommes » react to their social milieu and respond to the particular challenges their historical period imposes upon them.

*Gilles* is a book which can be inscribed within a long tradition of novels which explore the possibilities human life holds. It is preoccupied with determining the place of the individual in society. Even compared to such colossal achievements as Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté*, Aragon's *Aurélien*, De Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins*, Drieu's shot at

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<sup>149</sup> All page numbers refer to the 1973 Gallimard edition and will henceforth be included in parentheses.

<sup>150</sup> Andreu, Pierre, and Frederic Grover, 399

writing the novel of his generation stands out as particularly successful. Frédéric Grover compares the impetus behind writing *Gilles* to that of Flaubert composing *L'Education sentimentale*. In the two chronicles of a young man's life, he discerns a desire to paint a panoramic picture and tell the truth not simply about an individual, but about a whole generation as well.<sup>151</sup> Both are truthful accounts of an era. Arguably, it is that preoccupation with veracity, which accounts for the similar reception of the two novels. Both *L'Education sentimentale* and *Gilles* were met with vehement rejection. The majority of their readers were quite reluctant and, in some cases, downright offended and unwilling to accept that those two novels talked about **them**.<sup>152</sup> In *Gilles*' case at least, the outrage is understandable. People simply refused to recognize themselves in a novel, which paints a rather unflattering portrait of various societal groups. Statesmen, soldiers, doctors, prostitutes, society ladies ... Drieu's scathing narrative spares no one. And much like Flaubert's novel, *Gilles* depicts a society in which mediocrity and hypocrisy reign. The protagonist is a larger-than-life figure in the midst of his contemporaries. A

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<sup>151</sup> Grover quotes one of Flaubert's letters in which the novelist states that he wants to "write the moral history of men of [his] generation; sentimental history would be more accurate. It is a book of love, of passion; but of a passion such as can exist today, that is to say inactive. The subject, such as I conceived it is, I believe, profoundly true, but, because of that very fact, probably not very amusing. Deeds, drama, are lacking a little, and then the action is extending over too considerable a period of time"[Grover, 209, original reference in Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* (Paris, Bibliothèque – Charpentier, Fasquelle, 1924), V, 158].

<sup>152</sup> Critic Frédéric Lefevre constitutes a notable exception from the general trend. In 1940, he wrote that "reading *Gilles* will not be useless later to anyone desiring to penetrate the psychological aspects of the period between the two world wars, to understand the turmoils of those disturbed, convulsed years, rich in germs and abortions. In this novel of nearly five hundred pages, some are admirable, none is indifferent" (Lefevre, op.cit.)

decorated war hero with an uncanny gift for observation, he is constantly torn between the impulse to strive towards the noble and the great, and succumb to his petty desires and limitations. A complex individual, he is defined as much by his intelligence and magnanimity as he is by greed, cowardice and a penchant for easy life. Despite his controversial life choices, he emerges as an astute analyst and a lonely crusader striving to come to terms with his circumstances and make sense of his tenure on Earth.

Aside from providing an eyewitness account of some of the most significant events which marked the first decades of the Twentieth century, *Gilles* treats its day and age in a manner which surpasses the merely historical or merely personal context. Much like the other subjects of our present study, Gilles is far from being a likable character. Profoundly cynical, he has no morals and does not hesitate to use both men and women for the purposes of his own enrichment. He occasionally displays horrible egotism, prejudice, racism and misogyny, as well as cold-blooded calculation. Yet at the same time, he is a perfect case in point of a profoundly flawed literary character who simultaneously allows us to explore universal truths about the human condition. The major question which this chapter attempts to answer, then, is, what aspects of *Gilles* **redeem** its protagonist and allow the reader to see him as more than a deprived individual?

It seems to me that the great appeal *Gilles* holds for the reader lies first and foremost in its protagonist's striking perspicuity, his acute sense of self. On a daily basis, his life is dull, monotonous, vulgar and devoid of any meaning. What's more, by immersing us in the hell that is Gilles's life, Drieu forces us to confront a situation with which all of us are to a greater or lesser extent **already familiar**. As we shall

subsequently see, Gilles' daily existence is a quest against what he calls **nothingness – le néant**. Essentially, it is a search for meaning in a universe which makes no sense. His journey invariably strikes a chord with the reader who has at some point interrogated himself as to the meaningfulness of their existence on Earth. And last but not least, the possibility of elevating oneself above one's suffocating immediate surroundings through heroism, love and art are possibilities we have all entertained, and which we would likewise recognize in *Gilles*.

I hasten to add that the book, constructed around the search for meaning and redemption from Nothingness, goes to great lengths to deny the reader the possibility of a simple and "linear" reading. One is even less tempted to empathize with the protagonist. The brutal frankness with which occurrences from Gilles' life are recounted, the careful dissection of even the vilest and pettiest of motives, the abysmal egotism and cynicism which he displays at times make it especially hard to acknowledge any similarity between what drives him and the unfortunate reader. Yet, there is something profoundly human and touching in the laborious series of hopes and failures, of petty calculations and great suffering, of ecstasy and deception which pass in front of our eyes in a rapid succession (*Gilles* is also a novel with an extremely intricate plot).

## II.

Part One of *Gilles* is entitled *La Permission*, The Leave. It opens with a description of a young man's arrival at Gare de l'Est in Paris on leave from the front. It goes on to trace Gilles Gambier's interaction with a variety of people he encounters in Paris. Those range from the prostitutes for whom he has a particular fondness, to high-ranking civil officials and wealthy businessmen. Much like Bardamu, Gilles Gambier appears to embody traits and characteristics shared by all young men of his generation. He is a Twentieth-century Emile who must integrate himself in a society with which, we sense, he has always been somewhat at odds. *Gilles* is essentially a *Bildungsroman* which traces the life of a young man into adulthood.<sup>153</sup> Brought up in Normandy by a tutor (he never finds out who his real parents are), the young man has been raised in as non-conformist a fashion as possible. The fact that his parents are unknown reinforce the impression that he is an extraordinary human being and a self-made man. Being raised outside of a traditional family mold is a feature Gilles shares with a large number of Genet's protagonists. "The bastard child" is a fascinating creature because of their marginal position vis-à-vis mainstream society norms. As such, he is both free and dangerous, because he embodies a threat to conventional morality.

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<sup>153</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman is among the critics who have pointed out this obvious parallel. (Mehlman, 11) In the article quoted above, Mehlman calls *Gilles* "a breviary of collaboration", and this is almost a kind and indulgent comment. It is worth noting that both Céline and Drieu La Rochelle create their highly controversial works against the backdrop of traditional novel forms. While Drieu chooses the *Bildungsroman*, Céline stages *Voyage au bout de la nuit* as a travel narrative.



The description of Carentan, Gilles' tutor, further convinces us that we will be dealing with a very unusual young man indeed. He is portrayed as part philosopher, part religious fanatic, part eccentric. Relatively early in the novel, our attention is drawn to the idiosyncratic education he has given his foster child:

Je voulais faire de toi un homme libre. Non pas un homme sans racines, certes, bien au contraire. Mais un homme attaché seulement par l'essentiel, par des liens purs et forts. Je t'ai proposé par l'éducation que je t'ai donné ces racines, ces liens; ce que tu en feras, ça c'est autre chose. Mais je ne voulais pas que tu fasses encombré du détail. (*G*, 153)

By virtue of his peculiar upbringing, Gilles is immediately identified as a man to whom traditional norms of behavior do not apply. He is a lot more free as regards personal choices, and has been raised to answer to nobody. "C'est toi la seule réalité" (*G*, 153), Carentan advises him in lieu of a response to the question about his parents. Used to living by himself, the protagonist is, quite naturally, egotistical and insouciant as to the needs of others. Even physically, he stands out among his compatriots. Drieu's obsession with strength and virility is well documented. He believed that the Germanic race (blonde, blue-eyed people) was morally superior to the swarthy, decadent and impotent French people.<sup>154</sup> But the one thing which, from the beginning of the novel, would

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<sup>154</sup> There are a number of examples of Drieu's conviction that most of his countrymen were weaklings, devoid of dignity and consumed with decadence. He sincerely believed that it is every thinking French person's duty to help the Germans "reform" the French nation. Thus, in 1943, he would state "I am a fascist because I have measured the progress of decadence in Europe. I saw in fascism the only means of containing and reducing that decadence. I saw no other recourse but that [offered by] the genius of Hitler and Hitlerism." ("Bilan," *NRF* 347, (Jan. 1, 1943), 105.) A passionate ideology had made the Germans

render Gilles a compelling character is his respect for virility, strength and physical prowess. He has been raised to treat weakness and mediocrity with disdain. This unusual assembly of character traits allows Debrye, one of Gilles' former university acquaintances, to qualify him as "un esprit fin, trop séduit par les pensées et les actes rares." (G, 123) Owing to the particular circumstances surrounding his upbringing, Gilles is immediately designated as an inhabitant of a marginal space, as an individual to whom traditional rules of conduct do not apply. As such, he occupies a privileged space from which he can observe his surroundings in a relatively impartial manner.

Observation and assessment of his circumstances seem to be among the primary activities in Gilles' existence. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is constantly made aware of Gilles' interest in exploring a deep and meaningful reality, one which often remains out of reach for most ordinary individuals:

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strong; according to Drieu, Frenchmen could do with a healthy injection of such passion into their own national life.

Many important critics have ridiculed Drieu La Rochelle's obsession with the virility and prowess of the Germanic race. These assessments cannot all be quoted here, but I have chosen the most vitriolic demolition of all. It belongs to notable historian Eugen Weber, and comes from his review of Robert Saucy's *A Fascist Intellectual*. I have chosen to quote this passage not because I agree wholeheartedly with Weber, but because here, he expresses an opinion, shared by many. Writes Weber,

What could be more typical than this willowy, flanneled Anglomane, this flabby admirer of toughness, who inflated his schoolboy rebellion into intellectual arguments, projected his failings on others, railed at the decadence he brilliantly represented, glorified sports at which he was no good, rejected the materialism his hedonism required, turned his yearning for virility into a cult of what he lacked and his resentments into pranks, pamphlets, and spiteful creeds? The procrastinating narcissist wanted to be a man of action. (*The American Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (Apr., 1980), pp. 405-406)

Il s'arrêtait souvent au milieu d'une rue, au milieu d'une chambre pour écouter. Ecouter quoi ? Ecouter tout. Il se sentait comme un ermite léger, furtif, solitaire qui marche à pas invisibles dans la forêt et qui se suspend pour saisir tous les bruits, tous les mystères, tous les accomplissements. Il souhaitait de se promener pendant des années dans les villes et dans les forêts, de n'être nulle part et d'être partout. (G, 110)

Il écouterait, il regardait les hommes. Il était leur **témoin** le plus actuel et le plus inactuel, le plus présent et le plus absent. Il les regardait vive avec un œil aigu dans leurs moindres frémissements de jadis et de demain. (G, 111)

J'ai besoin de tâter toute la planète. Tout est concret pour moi : le lointain comme le proche, le laid comme le beau, la chose pourrie comme la chose saine. (G, 302)

Before he pursues contemplation and understanding, however, Gilles will first of all tackle the mundane question of survival, for he is an extremely practical individual. Upon arrival at Gare de l'Est in Paris, he has no money, no relations, no protector. He knows no one in the big city: "Où aller? Il était seul, il était libre, il pouvait aller partout. Il ne pouvait aller nulle part, il n'avait pas d'argent." (G, 25) The very first page of the book sums up an issue which will remain relevant throughout the remainder of the novel. Much like most ordinary people, Gilles is constantly oscillating between his avid desire to explore (aller partout) and some constraint which would keep him grounded to his surroundings and prevent him from going anywhere (aller nulle part). Yet, what's most striking about Gilles as we encounter him in the very beginning of the novel is not his poverty or lack of prospects, but his indifference to the circumstances. While he still has money in his pocket, he refuses to worry past the first delicious night of freedom: "Bah! C'était au moins une soirée. Demain, il verrait. Il avait des idées, et surtout une confiance

passionnée: rien ne résisterait à la violence de son appétit.” (*G*, 25) It is this singular faith, this refusal to become enslaved by petty things, so uncharacteristic of most people, coupled with the voracious appetite for life, which renders Gilles immediately compelling.

One of the most appealing aspects of *Gilles* is the masterful way in which Drieu La Rochelle manipulates the narration and incessantly shifts the perspective on his protagonist. Unlike most characters in a book who often retain a certain immutability, Gilles is depicted as a being, undergoing constant transformation. His opinions, plans and dreams transform before our very eyes. Thus, he emerges as an extremely plausible literary figure. He is constantly oscillating between conflicting and mutually exclusive impulses. For example, the larger-than-life disinterest with earthly matters is quickly replaced by an elaborate scheme to entrap Myriam, heiress to a large fortune and sister of his two dead comrades from the front. The initial plan to use her money in order to finance his escapades in the capital during the weeks of his leave changes as Gilles understands that Myriam is in love with him. A short courtship ensues and they become engaged. The meticulousness with which the plan unfolds reveals a completely different Gilles. He is a cold-blooded “coureur de dots”, an accusation which is more than once indirectly hurled at him by his new acquaintances. As the novel progresses, however, the perspective would shift yet again. The calculations – replaced by a description of a Gilles, completely enchanted by Myriam. The dispassionate and reluctant lover has become so invested in the new overwhelming sensations of his beloved’s presence that he no longer wishes to sully the time spent with her by yielding to vulgarity and calculation:

Gilles se retrouva dans la rue, sans argent. Il pesta un peu contre la prodigieuse insouciance de gens riches, mais il lui fallut aussi pester contre la sienne. Insouciance? Non, enchantement. Dieu merci, il s'était passé quelque chose qui lui avait fait oublier l'argent. ... L'argent viendrait tôt ou tard par le commerce le plus noble avec cette personne délicate; l'argent viendrait avec le bonheur. En attendant, le bonheur était déjà là. (G, 48)

It seems to me that it is precisely this constant modulation of the perspective which makes *Gilles* a truly arresting work of art. One of Drieu's greatest achievements lies in his resisting the novelist's urge to indoctrinate his audience and manipulate it into following a certain immutable perception of the protagonist. *Gilles* allows for a very interactive reading, and ultimately depicts a *human being* rather than a literary figure. This is due largely to the honest and objective manner in which Gilles attempts to evaluate his circumstances. He often muses upon the motives underlying his actions and tries to analyze the particular situation he finds himself in. Even if an impartial appraisal of the circumstances is not in his favor and often depicts him as an ignoble, calculating and self-centered individual, he is not afraid to face the facts.

Eventually, Gilles would go on to marry Myriam and become a wealthy man. Exacting and honest with himself, he proves an astute and critical observer of the society his new position has given him access to. Owing to his wife's connections, the former soldier would embark upon a career in diplomacy and thus evade a return to the front. The unlimited financial resources and social prestige of the Falkenberg family propels him in the midst of brilliant society. Contrary to his expectations – for has he not, indeed, unconsciously aspired to gain access to these social strata - he is shocked by the extreme hypocrisy and refusal to confront reality he encounters in his new surroundings. In yet

another example of the characteristic wavering between two extremes which has come to define Gilles, we see him horrified by the very designs he has meticulously construed to keep Myriam in his power. Suddenly petrified by the facility with which his base machinations seem to get accomplished, he decides to appraise two of his fiancé's friends of his true feelings for her. Rather than protect her, they would do "le nécessaire pour aider à Myriam à se perdre." (*G*, 116) They would feign incredulity, look for excuses and explanations and would end up underestimating the gravity of Gilles' confession: "Il remarqua une fois de plus qu'il était difficile d'être sincère: [on] lui facilitait l'hypocrisie." (*G*, 136) Myriam herself, to whom he states point blank that he is a liar – "Je ne suis pas celui que vous croyez; je suis menteur. Mon premier mouvement est toujours de mentir" (*G*, 132), prefers to ignore the obvious and carry on with the plans for their marriage, even though she understands that Gilles does not love her, feels no physical desire for her, and is attracted solely by her wealth,<sup>155</sup> she becomes his wife.

The uneasiness and remorse Gilles feels for his decision to infiltrate Myriam's hypocritical universe surface every so often with a force which seems almost too great to bear. It drives him to denigrate himself in the vain hopes that an outside power would prevent him from carrying out his plan. In one such scene, he cries out "J'ai peur de ne

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<sup>155</sup> Gilles is perhaps too young at the time of his wedding to fully comprehend that his union with Myriam is in fact quite far from being ordinary, or "rien," as he describes it to his tutor. By marrying Gilles fully cognizant of his designs and his disinterest in her, the young woman is, in her own way, being a non-conformist. Timid and far from outspoken, Myriam is also suffering from the constraints her surroundings impose on her. To the best of her abilities, she is trying to break free from them. Having been appraised of his protégé's matrimonial plans several weeks earlier, Carentan, Gilles' spiritual father, encourages him to carry on with them. He has rightly estimated that Myriam is a lot more conscious of the way matters stand than Gilles gives her credit for: "Elle souffrira, mais elle aura son aventure. A elle de se défendre." (*G*, 157)

pas vous aimer ... J'ai peur de ... d'aimer votre argent" (*G*, 134) only to see Myriam's face brighten up. She prefers to believe that he is trying to call off the wedding because he feels unworthy of her than to give up her illusion. Far from exposing the lie and the ignoble motives behind the betrothal, the confession only strengthens Myriam's infatuation and increases Gilles' cynicism: "Encore une fois sa tentative de sincérité tournait court, se transmuait en une habileté. Tout tournait toujours à son avantage, il jouait sur le velours avec cette petite. [...] Il s'en alla beaucoup plus cynique qu'il n'était venu." (*ibid*) On the day of the wedding, he is once again shocked by the lack of reaction on everyone's part: "Gilles, en venant à la mairie, s'attendait à quelque pataqués; il supposait que quelque incident ferait ressortir le caractère frauduleux de l'opération." (*G*, 188) Nothing could be further from the truth. He is welcomed by the placid indulgence and the criminal acquiescence of the few wedding guests: "[Il] rêva sur l'incroyable insensibilité de toutes les personnes présentes, y compris lui-même. Personne ne croyait à rien. Et pourtant, le mariage et l'opération fondamentale de l'existence." (*G*, 189) His cynicism is further fueled by the civic character of the ceremony, which takes place at the town hall rather than in a church. Both the bride and the groom know that they will get a divorce sooner or later. The overtly mundane character of the event convinces Gilles that nothing he does or thinks is an outrage in his day and age: "Il pensa à ce qu'il aurait éprouvé dans une église. Là, au moins, son acte aurait été un sacrilège, un crime. Ici, ce n'était rien, tout simplement." (*ibid*)

It is perhaps not entirely surprising that Gilles – a bastard child of rural France – might be overly sensitive to the set of values and mores which govern a society in which he is essentially an intruder. However, he is far from being the only one to harbor

resentment against well-established societal norms. It is no less significant, then, that the son of the very fictional President of the Republic, young Paul Morel, is portrayed as sharing Gilles' type of disgust: "Le monde entier se dressait avec une dureté de métal contre lui, l'hypocrisie de sa mère entre celle de son père et celle de Galant et de Cael faisait une paroi de prison parfaitement circulaire et lisse autour de lui." (G, 364) Paul is one of the numerous secondary characters we would encounter.<sup>156</sup> He is an emotionally unstable individual, debilitated by a mental disorder. Accustomed to being treated with indulgence and understanding, Paul acts like a spoiled child.<sup>157</sup> "Contre cela, il ne sentait que sa rage, sa faiblesse vibrante; il y avait dans son cœur une vibration spasmodique qui l'épuisait." (ibid) This puerile attempt at nonconformity precipitates his ultimate downfall, and, in an act of final defiance, the president's son takes his own life. Although he is a minor character, Paul Morel acts as a foil to Gilles. Drieu contrasts the former's

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<sup>156</sup> Many of the influential thinkers and artists of Drieu's day and age are immediately recognizable throughout the narrative. On a certain level, *Gilles* is a setting of scores – a not entirely original practice in French literature of the time. The character of Cyrille Gallant has been modeled after Aragon, while Paul Morel, as we shall subsequently see, has been inspired by the character of Philippe Daudet and a general disdain for the Surrealist movement. For more information, see Jeffrey Mehlman's article, "On Literature and the Occupation of France: Blanchot vs. Drieu"

<sup>157</sup> As Jeffrey Mehlman reminds us, the model of the pathological, indeed suicidal son of a great and powerful man would have been recognized by Drieu's readers as Philippe Daudet. The latter is Léon Daudet's son of the Royalist editor of *Action Française* and unremitting enemy of the Republic. Philippe's death was shrouded in mystery. It was an apparent suicide he committed shortly after emerging from a pornography shop in 1923. It remained the focus of all sorts of speculation at the time. For a fascinating analysis of the Surrealist echoes in *La Révolte* as a parable of purloined letters which convey the Oedipal structure of psychic conflict, see Mehlman's article.



weakness to the latter's lucidity and honesty in evaluating the circumstances he finds himself in.

The above examples constitute but a small portion of the numerous occurrences which allow our protagonist to observe the hypocrisy of the society he lives in. Drieu La Rochelle's novel may be interpreted as just one more work of art in which the individual finds himself at odds with the social reality. Much like the other protagonists in this study, he feels compelled to "set the record straight". World literature knows a myriad of such egregious individuals. And even within the novel, Gilles is far from being the only one to find himself uncomfortable in his surroundings. What makes him different from his possible rebellious and insubordinate counterparts, however, is once again the sobriety and acumen with which he observes and evaluates his situation. It is significant that he refuses to identify with organized protest, but instead chooses to rely on his own judgment. Drieu is particularly persevering in the depiction of his protagonist as a solitary man whose quest cannot be carried out in the company of others. It is almost as though, by identifying himself with other human beings, Gilles might lose his most vital capacity – his power of observation. Moreover, no organization of organized resistance can, in the narrator's view, be as effective as one individual.

Part Two of the novel, *L'Elysée*, ridicules the dealings of *Révolte*, an artistic association. Drieu's descriptions of *La Révolte* successfully ridicules the Surrealists and thus eloquently bears testimony to Drieu's irreverence to Breton and his associates.<sup>158</sup> It

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<sup>158</sup> In a review of a Surrealist exhibition written in 1938 for *Je suis partout*, Drieu unleashes his dislike for the movement: "Strolling through the miserable Surrealist Exhibition, in which there prevails something of the obstinacy of a sick and panicked child who would rather commit suicide than become an adult, I felt my heart become constricted. So much lost time, so many wasted days, what a sinister sadness." (P. Drieu la

goes without saying that a man such as Gilles, who reveres virility and manhood, has no place in an association. *La Révolte* is described by Carentan's caustic adage, "Beaucoup de talents, mais guère de couilles." (G, 305) It is significant, however, that Gilles feels as much out of place among the revolutionaries as he does among those to whom they are most strongly opposed. One of the most scathing episodes of the novel is the one depicting *Révolte*'s boycott of a meeting celebrating the great poet Boniface Saint-Boniface. The latter is an elderly laureate who, we are subtly led to believe, incarnates many of the sound and admirable qualities of the true Frenchman. The boycott is carried out in the true spirit of *Révolte*: "[l]a négation hoquetante de tout, compliquée d'une affirmation délirante d'un "je ne sais quoi." (G, 306) Gilles, who counts some of the members among his friends, is present along with his then-mistress, an American woman named Dora. The embarrassment caused by the ridiculous conduct of the 'revolutionaries' is intensified by her presence. *Révolte* lives up to its name and sabotages the celebration through a series of immature interpolations and verbal violence, which soon transform into a fistfight. Their opponents, however, are hardly any more dignified. Among them, an old hag stands out, "a vieille clocharde, avec ses fourrures pelées, ses cheveux comme des brins de paille sous son galurin." (G, 307) This ridiculous individual has "cet air rageur et ravi des ratés qui se croient célèbres." (G, 308) Ironically, she is sporting the Legion of Honor, thereby providing Drieu with an opportunity to poke fun at another venerable French institution. The undignified behavior of this woman supports Gilles' apt observation that the two opposing camps are fully worthy of one

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Rochelle, "Au temps des surréalistes," *Je Suis Partout*, March 11, 1938, reproduced in Drieu la Rochelle, *Sur les écrivains*, 317)

another: "Les gens de la droite et de la gauche se valent." (G, 307) As Carentan would later explain to Dora, "ce qui perd les Français, c'est qu'ils ne sentent plus leurs corps, ils sont tout en cervelle." (G, 313) It is significant that nobody but Gilles appears distressed by the state of affairs. Except for him, no one even bothers to point out how ridiculous this behavior has been.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> This seems an opportune moment to raise the important question of Drieu's attitude towards political parties and movements. The number of critics who have bothered looking beyond Dieu's reactionary and pro-Nazi sentiments is significantly smaller than that of people who have dismissed him as a Fascist. However, the writer's position was a lot more complex and equivocal. Like many other "nonconformists" of the 1930s, Drieu hoped for a political renewal through which the endless corruption of parliamentary parties could be replaced by the spontaneous, orgiastic movements of crowds in the street. (For an inventory of groups on both the Left and Right that attempted to rethink the role of the individual, politics, and labor in this period, see Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's book *Les Non-Conformistes des années trente*. (Paris, 1969) Allan Stoekl provides us with an excellent summary of Drieu's political affiliations:

That plan was itself the result of Drieu's desire for a kind of "third force," this time on the level of national politics. Drieu was opposed both to the Left and the Right as they were constituted in France, and Marshall Petain, who had been installed in Vichy with the blessing of the Germans, was the model of everything that Drieu despised in right-wing politics and political groups. In fact, Drieu had little but contempt for the parties of either Left or Right; both, in his estimation, were "sclerotic," both worked more to crush revolutionary fervor than to unleash it. In a 1934 essay entitled "Les Evénements de Février" (The Events of February), Drieu examines the cooptation of spontaneous street violence by the "moderates" of the parties. Both the left-wing groups (Socialists, Communists, and the center- leaning "radicaux de gauche") and the right-wing parties, including the Action Française, were eager to compromise after the street fighting of February 1934; the effervescence of the fascists, rioting on 6 February, was soon reined in by established groups, and in the same way the violence of the Communists on 9 February was easily controlled by the French Communist Party. Both Left and Right, in containing the crowd violence, only helped strengthen the Center and the bourgeois (democratic) mode of government (Stoekl, 133)

If I have chosen to dwell at length on the examples of Gilles' non-conformity, it is because I believe that there is anything extraordinary about his status of a rebel. His position is not even unique for the novel, which abounds in characters, invested in defending their own cause. What's more, Gilles is as capable of ruse and baseness in order to attain a goal he has set for himself as the next person. Yet one cannot help but be struck by the marvelous lucidity which he preserves with regards to the driving force behind and the impact of all his endeavors. On numerous occasions, he has a quaint, almost out-of-body experience of observing himself as he must appear to others. He comments upon the pitiful figure he must cut as he goes about executing his designs. The first day he sets foot at Quai d'Orsay – his future workplace, he notes that his colleagues must find him despicable: "Il nota qu'il ressemblait au plus sale petit fantoche qui vient solliciter une embuscade ou une place. Il rappela toute sa **lucidité** pour réprimer sa gêne et sa révolte. En tout cas, il fallait dépendre de quelqu'un." (*G*, 114, emphasis mine) It is this very realistic gaze, this unblinking recognition of things for what they are which would eventually come to distinguish Gilles from the majority of the people he interacts with on a daily basis.

### III.

I've often heard the glib motto "The pen and the sword join in a single path."

But in truth, they can join only at the moment of death.

-Yukio Mishima<sup>160</sup>

As we have seen in the previous section, Gilles' lucidity is his most unique characteristic and the one which sets him apart from almost everybody he interacts with. Regardless of how unpleasant the situation he finds himself in is, regardless of the bitter conclusions that he needs to draw about himself, he attempts to remain as objective and honest as he possibly can. Moreover, he seems to possess a talent for noting the false, the strained, the unnatural in his surroundings. This is due, in part, to his position of an outsider and an intruder to his wife's social circle. It renders him that much more finely attuned to the falsity of behavior he observes there. But even more importantly, he had been a soldier and fought in the war. Thus, he obtained a life experience, profoundly different from civilian reality. At the front, evaluating a situation in the best possible way and reacting to it most adequately could mean the difference between life and death. There, he had to learn to live in harmony with his body and maintain a constant contact with the physical aspect of existence. Myriam would be struck by his ability to put into words many sensations and urges she, too, has had, but was never capable of expressing. At the time when the two are still basking in a nascent affection, he would recount for her some the most remarkable war events. Listening to his words, she would recognize that

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<sup>160</sup> I could not resist the temptation to borrow this quote from Allan Stoekl's article "Nizan, Drieu, and the Question of Death." It seems to capture extremely well the interplay between writing, war and the possibility of war we will be exploring in the following section.

she, too, has felt this way but always lacked the vocabulary and the understanding to phrase exactly what it was that she felt: “Cette idée qu’on ne peut jouir vraiment de la vie qu’en la risquant toute, tout de suite, dès vingt ans, dès qu’on est conscient, c’est formidable, c’est ce que je cherchais. Comme un imbécile, je n’avais pas su me formuler ça” (G, 61), she would exclaim. The narrator would attribute this impossibility to her not being used to the sheer physicality of existence: “Dans son milieu, on ignorait toute expérience physique: que ce fut le sport, l’amour ou la guerre.” (G, 61) At the same time, Gilles recognizes that he, too, would not have been aware of the physical aspects of existence, had he not spent time in combat: “Je n’aurais jamais compris cela, sans la guerre.” (G, 62)

The novel would constantly insist upon the importance of the physical, and place a great deal of emphasis on this power, energy, brute force and vigor which are released in combat. The reader is made constantly aware of the fact that there is a marked difference between people of action and those who have never fought at the front. The latter’s existence is depicted as a semi-vegetative state. They are believed incapable of breaking free of the contingency of existence. The experience of the war has given focus to Gilles’ thought, and rendered him more determined. It has also allowed him to understand himself better and be more eloquent and efficient in expressing himself. Rereading the pages he’s written while convalescing at the hospital after surgery on his arm, the young man would, much to his own surprise, see the change in the way he writes:

Car, avant la guerre, sa pensée, qui avait été primesautière pendant l’adolescence, bientôt accablée par les études diverses, était devenue hésitante, timide, inerte. Loin des livres,

depuis trois ans, elle s'était déliée et musclée. Il méditait sur son expérience de la guerre et voyait qu'elle lui composait une figure de la vie. (G, 65)

As this passage indicates, there is a great deal of importance placed on the vital connection existing between the body and the spirit. Furthermore, it is in straining the limits of the physical that one comes to know the boundaries of the intellectual and stands a chance of attaining real self-knowledge.

In singling out World War One as the most influential and formative event in his life, Gilles voices the anxieties of his entire generation. "Il se trouve que, pour notre génération, la guerre est la première expérience de la vie. Vous avez peur de n'y pas répondre généreusement" (G, 126), Debrye, one of his friends would offer by means of an explanation of the fascination the war held for his contemporaries. And it's worth it, for once, to give in to the temptation and quote one of Drieu La Rochelle's letters. It aptly transmits the general air of exaltation, which to the author became synonymous with the war experience. This particular account comes from a letter Drieu sent to his friend Jean Boyer from the hospital in Toulouse where he was taken after his second wounding:

J'ai connu deux ou trois instants formidables, inoubliables. A Charleroi, j'ai entendu la voix d'hommes de France crier : en avant, *a la baïonnette* ! Je brûlais d'un amour fou, j'adorai ce lieutenant, j'aurais voulu baiser sur les lèvres, à la russe, à la St François ce caporal syphilitique qui ouvrait des yeux d'enfant mal réveillé (de l'ignoble somnolence de la paix) à cet enivrant appel de la gloire. Et les clairons, il y avait des clairons. La trompette de guerre sonnait dans mon sang du fond des âges. Toute ma culture a fleuri dans cet instant. J'embrassai sur cette plaine labourée d'obus toute la vieille histoire humaine : les élans inextinguibles, sanglotants des races vers l'éternelle idole de la Force,

de la Grandeur – et puis les plaintes enfantines, qui nous font souffrir comme une mère doit souffrir de l'enfantement, qui se lèvent des hécatombes, après. J'étais tremblant et tendu comme à mon premier baiser d'amour.<sup>161</sup>

A very similar ecstatic joy, a certainty that all is possible characterizes Gilles' experiences at the front. It is therefore not surprising that the contrast between a dull and hypocritical civil life and the possibility of exceptional sensations on the battlefield are inscribed at the core of the novel. The juxtaposition is particularly poignant in *La Permission*, Part One of the novel, which takes place before the War's end and thus quite literally allows Gilles to go back and forth between these two realms of existence.

The appeal war holds for Gilles, as well as for his contemporaries who have experienced action at the front, seems to lie in the possibility of sacrifice. By its very nature, warfare implies sacrifice, the only impulse which defies the contingency of existence. In constantly sending the reader back to the opposition of merely living and heroic existence, Drieu La Rochelle lives up to his Nietzschean background. He considered the German philosopher "le prophète du 20e siècle."<sup>162</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra* was, allegedly, the only book he carried with him to the front and appropriately abandoned with all his equipment at the Battle of Charleroi.<sup>163</sup> Gilles

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<sup>161</sup> Andreu, Pierre and Frédéric Grover, 97

<sup>162</sup> *Notes*, 48

<sup>163</sup> Alan Stoekl reminds us that, at the height of the events of 1934, Drieu's protagonist Gilles had declared himself willing to go with any group that had the nerve to fight in the street. Nonetheless, the author himself was against hierarchy in society. He did not take inspiration from Hitler and Marx, as much as he did from Nietzsche. In writings such as *The Will to Power*, the latter argued for a "permanent revolution," against frozen, stratified caste systems. In this sense, Drieu's reading of Nietzsche reminds us of Georges



acknowledges that war allows one to raise above one's immediate circumstances, and thereby experience a higher, more intense form of existence. Thus, his view conforms to the Nietzschean ideal. *La Permission* abounds in moments in which a particular sentiment which the narrator would call **ecstasy**, is transmitted: "Il avait eu, dans les tranchées, des heures d'extase, il avait fallu les plus terribles convulsions pour l'en réveiller." (*G*, 112) As the choice of the word "convulsions" implies, it is extreme horror and suffering which render ecstasy possible. Those are hardly ever present – or even possible, in "real" human life. What's more, Gilles' contemporaries would go to great lengths to avoid them, as his experience in Myriam's hypocritical world has shown him only too clearly. However, the individual who has experienced that higher form of existence is changed forever. This is why Gilles stands apart from his fellow men. He is above all driven by his insatiable desire to feel the fervor and ecstasy he knew at the front again. "Vous êtes médiocre. Mais vous n'avez pas l'ombre d'une idée de ce qu'il y a en moi. Vous ne savez pas quelles profondeurs j'ai atteintes en moi, à la guerre" (*G*, 99), he would reproach one of his lovers before leaving her forever. It is for that very reason that he deems war necessary: "La guerre, si défigurée qu'elle soit, demeure nécessité." (*G*, 124) By the same token, the one who has participated in – and survived – the war, has had an experience so unique that he must live *apart* from most people: "Je refuse tout ce

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Bataille. The only major difference lies in Bataille's attempt to dissociate the German philosopher completely from his fascist exponents. (see "Nietzsche et les fascistes" in the first volume of Bataille's *Oeuvres complètes*) Bataille's ideology is not dissimilar to Nietzsche's. In the mid-thirties, he was attempting to organize a party of "effervescent" revolt. It would share the aspects of revolution dear to Nietzsche and Drieu, but would not be fascist, anti-Semitic, or controlled by big business. Bataille saw, "effervescence" as inimical to the absolutism of fascism. (For more information, see Georges Bataille's "Acephale" writings from this period (1937-39) in the first volume of his *Oeuvres complètes*. (Paris, 1970)

monde. La guerre, c'est ma patrie." (G, 127) Ordinary existence, in other words, is deemed insufficient, and one is forced to confront its inadequacy for as long as one lives. Those that have had the chance to feel the pure force of war would be incapable of replacing the sensation by anything they might encounter in ordinary life. Gilles' generation views the war as a unique chance. Therefore, they have great trouble living among ordinary mortals again: "[N]ous qui sommes revenues, sinon flambants de la guerre [sommés] liés à jamais à une idée émouvante de la vie forte.» (G, 602) Such individuals would have a hard time returning to existence among «les ames blettes.» (ibid)

The former soldier, fascinated as he may be by life in Paris, would constantly compare it with the experience of the front. He often feels as though he has abandoned his true calling: "Gilles se demandait pourquoi il était venu à Paris et il projetait de repartir le lendemain matin pour la campagne, là où florissaient les obus et cette mort qui est vraiment le grand intérêt de la vie." (G, 38) War, this constant reminder of the fragility of human life, is thereby the ultimate antipode and the most unequivocal renunciation of existence. It provides one with an alternative, an escape vault to living, and the nothingness – le néant – which often characterizes it. The more despairing the circumstances Gilles finds himself in in civil life, then, the greater his longing for the front and the stronger the nostalgia he feels for it:

Toute cette vie n'était que faiblesse et lâcheté, frivolité inepte. Il ne pouvait vivre que là-bas; ou plutôt il était fait pour mourir là-bas. Il n'était pas fait pour vivre. La vie telle qu'elle s'offrait à lui, telle qu'il semblait pouvoir seulement la vivre, était inattendue,

décevante de façon incroyable. Il n'était capable que d'une belle action, se détruire. Cette destruction serait son hommage à la vie, le seul dont il fut capable. (G, 72-3)

Other than its being the complete opposite of contingent earthly existence, war is also attractive because thrill which goes hand in hand with action provides one with extreme self-fulfillment. Drieu La Rochelle himself was only too susceptible to the excitement of the war zone, having experienced first hand the transformational power of fighting. Going back to his first encounter with the battlefield, he would write, in *La Comédie de Charleroi*, that it is during that battle that he became aware for the first time of the tremendous potential in every human being. « L'homme est libre, l'homme peut ce qu'il veut », he would exclaim. Critic Frédéric Grover expands on the momentous experience : « Le bourgeois timide, l'aspirant intellectuel, le liseur vorace a découvert dans celui qui a pris tout naturellement la direction de la charge un héros, noble et généreux, un chef, sur lui et des autres.<sup>164</sup> In *La Comédie de Charleroi*, an earlier text which echoes throughout *La Permission*, Drieu himself presents this extraordinary transformation in the following manner : « Alors, tout d'un coup, il s'est produit quelque chose d'extraordinaire. Je m'étais levé, levé entre les morts, levé entre les larves. J'ai su ce que veulent dire grâce et miracle ... Tout d'un coup, je me connaissais, je connaissais ma vie. C'était donc ma vie, cet ébat qui n'allait plus s'arrêter jamais. » (*La Comédie*, p. 57) Similarly, the awareness that he has had an extraordinary experience would convince him that it is imperative to share it with the world. Drieu does not hesitate to stake his claim of being recognized within the long lineage of great writer-warriors who have, at one point or another, referred to the state of war as the greatest counterpoint to everyday existence: "Ils

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<sup>164</sup> Grover, 103

passaient devant la petite maison de Balzac. Lui et Stendhal et quelques autres avaient accepté, sinon loué la violence sans rien ignorer de ses cotés horribles, difficiles à supporter pour un civilisé nerveux. Ils avaient écrit des pages lucides sur la guerre.” (G, *ibid*)

It is the immediate presence of death one feels in war, which allows Gilles to perceive and reevaluate existence from the viewpoint of its **end**.<sup>165</sup> This experience is foreign to the great majority of human beings. Confronted with the notion that his life could be over, he understands that it is an incredibly valuable and fragile gift. Most people rarely have a chance to see their life in such light, for everyday existence most often attempts to **shield** us from experiencing this very fragility. The realization that one may just as easily **cease to be** constitutes for Gilles a life-changing event. The extraordinary circumstances he finds himself in propel him to recognize in himself the

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<sup>165</sup> The decline in the faith of rationalism which started manifesting itself after the mid-Nineteenth century provoked an increase in interest in the problem and the phenomenon of death. Death was viewed as the most radical experience possible. But unlike other types of experiences, death, which everybody fears, cannot really be described. Moreover, it establishes a temporality within our lives whether we want it to or not (the feared "day of our death.") The intellectual historian can trace two main influences which have characterized this type of reflection. On the one hand, we have Surrealism with its interest in primitive rites, sacrifice, the occult. The Surrealists rewrote and popularized the French literary heritage of writers such as Sade, Baudelaire, and Lautréamont. On the other hand, we have the contributions of philosophers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, for whom the experience of dread and the inescapability of death were central concerns. (Major texts in this renewed interest in German thought and phenomenology are Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel from the 1930s, *Introduction a la lecture de Hegel* (Paris, 1947); Jean Wahl's *Etudes Kierkegaardiennes* (Paris, 1938); and Henri Corbin's translation of Heidegger in French, "Qu'est-ce que la metaphysique," which appeared in Bifur's 1930 translation. The latter particularly influenced writers such as Sartre, Blanchot, and Bataille.) For more information, see Stoekl, 121.

possibility of the *Surhomme*, and understand that he is capable of **being** it. Gilles' experience seems directly influenced by that of his creator. Critic Frederic Grover writes, "A sa grande surprise, Drieu s'aperçoit que ce surhomme dont il était tant question dans les livres de son auteur favori n'est pas seulement le rêve d'un invalide ; il en a la révélation physique sur le champ de bataille : « Ah ! je l'avais pressenti à certaines heures, ce bouillonnement du sang jeune et chaud – puberté de la vertu, j'avais senti palpiter en moi un prisonnier, prêt à s'élancer. Prisonnier de la vie qu'on m'avait faite, que je m'étais faite. Prisonnier de la foule du sommeil, de l'humilité. »<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Grover, 103-4

#### IV.

The possibility for greatness and surpassing of the self are then the reasons why Gilles often laments the end of the war. He frequently states that he would have preferred to die on the battlefield rather than live according to the demands society imposes upon him. Yet, he is far from renouncing civil life with all its pettiness and limitations. He is constantly going back and forth between the two possibilities. Initially, he returns to Paris because he needs surgery. Once his arm has been operated on and he is healed, he is lured by the security of civilian life and refuses to go back to the front. Myriam's connections being such that he can get any job he wants to, he opts for the tranquil existence at Quai d'Orsay. Several months later, he would nonetheless leave, on a whim, following an irresistible impulse to escape his suffocating marriage. Once he finds out that his division will be relocated to a more dangerous part of the front, he forgets all about his desire to die:

Maintenant, la mort ne lui paraissait plus du tout sous le même aspect qu'au début de la guerre quand il ignorait l'amour et l'argent, Myriam et Alice et mille autre choses, le Quai d'Orsay et le salon de Mme Florimond. La guerre est l'affaire des adolescents qui peuvent lui faire le don d'une ame ignorante. Mais un homme divisé, souillé par toutes les passions s'en défend plus. (*G*, 239)

The very turn of the last phrase speaks volumes about the challenge of reconciling the two opposing impulses which Gilles constantly feels. It turns the traditional concept of life and death upside down. The natural inclination is that of preserving life, not abandoning it. In Drieu La Rochelle's novel, the one who may cling to it is thought of as

contaminated, impure – “souillé”. Or, if we probe deeper into the significance of these vacillations, we will discover that Gilles’ main dissatisfaction is not with the circumstances *outside* of him, but with himself. The possibility of heroism intrinsic to any military conflict serves as a key to beginning to understand an insufficiency everyone has felt in themselves while questioning whether they are living their life to the fullest.

Once the war is over, Gilles would prove incapable of giving up this higher type of living, and constantly search to come close to the thrill, intensity and vigor which he experienced at the front. Similarly to the other protagonists in this study, he would look for ways to transcend the boundaries of everyday existence by falling in love. For a while, in fact, love and war go hand in hand. The first time Gilles becomes infatuated with a woman, he is still at the front. It is significant that this momentous event occurs after his wedding, when, whimsically, he returns to the battlefield. The first days are pure bliss. He sincerely relishes his return to the theatre of war. At the front, he is no longer dependent on his wife and does not have to endure the pretense and hypocrisy of her social circle: “Et ici, au front, il était chez lui, il ne dépendait plus de Myriam. Il était protégé contre son reproche par ses bottes boueuses, par les homes qu’il coudoyait dans l’étroit vestibule de l’hôtel, par ce bruit de cuisines roulantes dans la rue.” (*G*, 216) It appears as though he has been absolved from his greed and calculations. The front has offered him a chance to live again. His reward is an unique opportunity. He meets and falls in love with someone who incarnates his ideal of humanity. Alice is a fellow French volunteer, a nurse at the front. She shares his passionate infatuation with the war. They become lovers right away. Prior to meeting her, Gilles has encountered very few individuals who feel the virility, power and vigorous draw of war the way he does. Alice

attracts him irresistibly precisely because she is an embodiment of the brute force he adores. She is capable of feeling and understanding the thrill of combat much like he does: “Dans sa vie était entré fort, libre, sincère, un de ces rares êtres qui sont entiers, à qui la nature a beaucoup donné et qui lui rendent abondamment.” (*G*, 207)<sup>167</sup>

Alice’s arrival in Gilles’ life constitutes such an extraordinary occurrence that initially, he is incapable of placing her in any category of human beings he has known before. To him, she is a fusion between the two types of people he feels most comfortable around: soldiers and prostitutes. She is “tout ce qu’il avait cherché parmi les soldats et les filles.” (*G*, 210) Like the first, she reminds him of the beauty of sacrifice. Like the latter, she appeases the most insatiable aspect of his physicality. What’s more, it is in the visceral, physical fusion with the beloved that he experiences unity with a part of existence and being he has hitherto cherished: “Quand il prenait ce grand corps dans ses bras, il serrait une idée qui lui était chère. Une certaine idée de force et de noblesse [...]” (*G*, 271) Once again, it is strength and nobility which he has only experienced in war, but which he has not stopped searching for.

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<sup>167</sup> Zeev Sternhell has argued that Nietzsche’s praise for vitality was one of the key elements that distinguished the so-called “new right” (that of the Third Republic, the era of mass politics) from earlier, post-Revolution, right-wing groupings. Sternhell points out that, ideologically, the new right reflected the great intellectual revolution of the turn of the century. It combined social Darwinism, racism, the social psychology of Le Bon, and Nietzsche’s philosophical revolt. In the sphere of ideas, the end of the nineteenth century was already deeply affected by a resurgence of irrational values, by a cult of instinct and sentiment, and by an affirmation of the supremacy of the forces of life and the affections .... Nietzsche had a considerable influence on the “new school” [e.g., Edouard Berth], as he had formerly had on Barres, and it is therefore not surprising the successors of these two in the thirties should also be very preoccupied with him. (Sternhell, 26; 33; 87.)



Alice has no precedent in Gilles' life. More importantly, she arrives as though to answer a need which the protagonist has difficulty formulating but which he sincerely feels. We have every right to call their first meeting a miracle. They cross each other in a dark corridor and feel an immediate, and irresistible, force which draws them to one another. The description of the Gilles' reverence for his lover carries unmistakable religious overtones. He receives Alice as one would a benediction:

Pourtant, Gilles était le plus modeste, le plus respectueux, le plus admiratif, le plus reconnaissant des vainqueurs. Il était transporté. Toute la misère des dernières semaines, le doute insidieux qui s'était introduit en lui et qui avait fait office de remords, tout cela ne tressaillit encore une seconde que pour prêter un contraste à sa présente éclosion dans la certitude et dans la force. Il revivait ou plutôt il commençait à vivre. Il sortait des ténèbres, d'une longue parturition douloureuse, sale. (*G*, 208)

The language in which Gilles' fascination with Alice is rendered brings the reader to the realm of the religious. It reiterates Gilles' longing for the extraordinary. It illustrates his desire to surpass the mundane and evoke the divine. Gilles' love for Alice allows him to ascend to a level of understanding of reality he has hitherto had no access to. In keeping with the vocabulary of the divine, Gilles' love is compared to a supernatural revelation, a sudden understanding of obscure and inexplicable aspects of existence. It is significant that the narrator establishes a parallel between the lovers' sentiments and those who are infatuated by a work of art:

Quand un amoureux de la musique vient d'avoir la révélation, à travers un bon orchestre et un génial conducteur, d'une symphonie dont a tâtons, depuis des années, il cherchait la

clé spirituelle, il rejette le programme qui lui offre des renseignements formels, tels que la date, l'humeur suppose de l'auteur au moment où il écrivait, ses ennuis d'argent, ses relations avec les imbéciles maîtres du monde. Gilles et cette femme étaient soudain en possession de la science la plus précise, mais aussi la plus rétive aux formules." (G, 208-9)

Art and love appear, then, as complementary forces. Both render the individual strong enough to forego formal restrictions and come up with its own set of rules for understanding and governing his existence. The true artist crafts a hitherto unknown universe which obeys no other rules but the ones he imposes upon it. In the same way, a man in love experiences living quite unlike ever before. Both love and art constitute a miracle, and come to redefine existence. As has been the case with war, the novel positions art and as successful counterparts to mundane existence.

It must be noted, however, that even if Gilles establishes a parallel between the artist and the lover, he himself never attempts to be an artist. We see him, in the section of *L'Apocalypse*, become a man of letters of certain success and notoriety, but he never creates real works of art. Even though we are told on several occasions that he is writing and taking notes, a novel is never produced. He even seems vexed whenever Myriam suggests that he should become a writer after the end of the war. Still, the very manner in which he perceives the reality around him suggests a writer's sensibility. His gift of observation means that he is extremely attentive to detail. He sees hidden, deeper meaning where others do not. He views his relationships with the women he falls in love as a creative process, an opportunity to create understanding and fusion between two people: "Je voudrais te rendre capable de **construire** avec moi cet amour unique en

supprimant tout mensonge, sur le passe ou le présent" (G, 290), he would tell Dora, his American lover. When, several days after this confession, he takes her for a walk in the forest, and attempts to talk to her for the first time seriously about their future together, he would do so against this carefully selected backdrop. He takes her to the forest near Lyons, because he esteems the mighty trees and wilderness around them a more suitable *mise en scène* than drab and crowded Paris. In nature, he searches for the same grandiosity and larger-than-life impression which he found at the front.

Là il aurait voulu la préparer au ton secrètement hautain des cathédrales, des châteaux et des palais qui sont les derniers points d'appui de la grâce, car les pierres ont mieux réussis que les âmes. Il était soudain fort éloigné de leur lit et de ses fièvres ; elle retrouvait près de lui le climat nordique ou les sens nourrissent si abondamment le rêve, qu'ils s'y épuisent et s'y effacent pendant des longs moments. Il n'était plus que floraison imaginaire. (G, 296)

Like the artist for whom the external and the internal always align, Gilles is looking to harmonize the trepidation, caused by the overwhelming sentiment of love, and the awe which the immensity of nature inspires. The careful reader has been aware of this drive towards invention, construction, manipulation of the surroundings from the very beginning of the novel. The first chapter of the book depicts Gilles talking a walk in Paris and carefully observing the people around him. Seemingly aimless, his stroll nonetheless has a "goal" which he is unable to name just yet: "Tout le monde semblait aller vers un but. Et lui aussi, il avait un but dont la forme lui était encore inconnue." (G, 28) The whole work which follows can be interpreted as the quest for form hinted at in the very beginning. Gilles' life resembles that of the artist who spends a lifetime gathering

impressions and materials so that he can put them all in one big comprehensive artwork. It looks almost as though Drieu's protagonist has no other choice **but** to reach understanding. Gilles himself never seems to doubt that, for the paragraph ends with curious prophecy: "Tôt ou tard, cette forme allait se découvrir." (ibid)

Love brings out the best in Gilles. It inspires him to be a better human being, and live life to its fullest potential. When in love, he is always sincere. However, he also has a fickle personality which means that he is an individual of extremely fluctuating humor. Strong as his feelings for Alice are, they cannot survive once they find themselves away from the battlefield. In civilian life, Gilles is unable to remain close to the woman who symbolizes everything which is pure and worthwhile in human existence. Greatly dependent on material comfort, Gilles has a hard time giving up its source - his wife. He is only too aware of his own shortcomings, especially in Alice's immediate proximity. Alice is immune to material preoccupations. His lover does not care about money or luxury. She has proven her disinterest on a number of occasions. Her moral purity and rectitude make Gilles suffer that much more from his own dependence. The dynamic between the two lovers rapidly changes once they obtain a leave together and go spend it among civilians: "Ils s'arrangèrent pour aller à Lyon passer ensemble deux courtes permissions. Mais alors, comme s'il leur avait été interdit de sortir d'un cercle qui les protégeait, le charme se rompit." (G, 220) Later on, in Paris, Alice would finally see her lover's true colors and exclaim, disdainfully, "Je ne croyais pas qu'il put y avoir en toi un Parisien ... un bourgeois ..." (G, 221) And rather than contradict Alice, rather than attempt to prove her wrong, Gilles acquiesces and, moreover, can hardly contain his admiration for her : « Il la considéra avec une craintive et lointaine admiration. » (G, 221)

Like war, which can never last forever, Gilles and Alice's affair comes to an end. The young man refuses to relinquish his independence: "Beaucoup plus que l'argent de Myriam, c'était lui-même qu'il voulait réserver, sa disponibilité" (*G*, 240), he would acknowledge as he leaves her forever. Yet taking a leave of Alice would influence him stronger than anything he has ever experienced before. He would never actually recover from it but continue to **search** for a similar relationship. Looking back towards Alice who's dissolving in the distance behind him, he shivers, thinking that he might have turned his back on an opportunity of great bliss which is rarely encountered in ordinary human life. It is the same kind of feeling he would search for with Dora, his American mistress. He falls in love with her after the war. Once again, his feelings are intense and he appears constantly elated. The powerful sentiment of shared love translates into an almost euphoric confidence in himself and the rest of the world: "Il avait cru en elle, et ayant cru en elle, et ayant cru en elle, il avait cru en lui-même comme il ne l'avait jamais fait, si ce n'est à quelques moments dans l'action de la guerre ou devant Alice." (*G*, 368)

There are a number of parallels between the two love stories. The outcome of the later one is in many ways pre-determined by the earlier. Yet there is one essential difference, which signals a growing, an evolution on Gilles' part. His infatuation with Alice has been a corollary of the infatuation with the war. Love and war go hand in hand, as they constitute a negation of ordinary existence. Loving Alice has been an **extraordinary circumstance**. Once the war is over, it, too comes to an end. When Gilles falls in love with Dora (whom he initially finds **ugly** and ordinary), he does so in the midst of the very drab, meaningless and shallow existence he despises himself. This time, there is no escape mechanism in place. The miracle occurs in the same city, among the

same people he has been living in ever since the war came to an end. Except this time, Gilles is ready have the experience. What this readiness signals, in other words, is accepting to live **life on its own terms, without changing anything about it**: “Il croit, il croit dans la vie, il se donne à elle entièrement. Il offre à un autre être un magnifique, un unique instrument de bonheur.” (ibid) The result of this accepting and rejoicing in the same life which, before Dora, he has thought essentially contingent and mediocre, is extasy. The force of his emotions is such that they are almost animalistic: “Il y a un moment dans la vie d’un être où il donne tout son chant; il sort de lui un grand cri droit et apte portant à toutes les modulations.” (G, 368) This passage reminds one of Drieu La Rochelle’s perspicacious reading of none other than *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Writing in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1941, Drieu would claim:

Au-delà de sa psychologie implacablement exacte du Français et de l'homme moderne, au-delà de son pessimisme et de sa furieuse dépréciation de ce qui est moribond ... Céline voit la vie resplendir a nouveau. Il ne tient qu'a nous de la voir aussi, et de lui donner l'occasion de chanter.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> NRF 55, no. 327 (May 1941). It is in his *Notes pour comprendre le siècle*, which comes out in 1941, that Drieu deploys more or less explicitly, if not systematically, the properly philosophical discourse that underlies his admiring remarks on Céline. The inspiration is profoundly Nietzschean. To put it very schematically, he was evoking the Nietzschean discourse of self- overcoming (Selbstaufhebung), in which a distressing but at the same time "joyful" Dionysian immersion in nihilistic "decadence" precedes and facilitates the eventual overcoming of this nihilism. Or, to put it in Drieu's own terms: "Dans le pire, l'homme retouche terre et rebondit. Le corps et l'ame arrives au fond de la dégradation renaissent en même temps.... Au plus profond de la déchéance, de la décadence, l'homme reprend pied." (*Notes*, 105-6; 131)

Similarly, when in love, Gilles feels a surge of unsuspected power. He has faith in his abilities to change any human decision, overcome any obstacle and literally claim the place of God. “Veux-tu vivre? Oui ou non?”, he would hurl at his mistress. Without a doubt, he views their love as a miracle, one which is capable of raising a metaphorical corpse from the grave of existence: “C’est toi qui m’as crié, à Biarritz, que tu étais comme enterrée vivante. Est-ce que tu ne vis plus depuis trois mois?” (ibid)<sup>169</sup>

The feeling is so strong, it brings back the memories of the magnificent experience of the war. “D’abord, [...] il avait douté de l’existence des choses, comme, pendant la guerre, à Verdun, au milieu de l’acharnement des tonnerres, dans une tranchée ou une maligne surdité lui enfonçait ses vilebrequins dans les deux oreilles, tandis qu’un camarade expulsait ses boyaux en plein gilet, il avait brusquement ragé et s’était mis à écumer : « Dieu n’existe pas. » (G, 400-1) In this striking passage, characterized by powerful diction and a poignant description, man has supplanted the divinity. Once again, one cannot help but see a parallel with Nietzsche – it is on the battlefield, or at the

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<sup>169</sup> This phenomenon can once again be explained through Nietzsche. The will to power takes a largely affective, instinctive Dionysian form. It evokes the feeling of 'jubilant mastery,' the "complex state of pleasure," that accompanies all successful actions, as Nietzsche puts it. For Nietzsche, the Dionysian pertains to pathos, to the sensual, the affective, and to the incontrovertible fact of the body and the bodily. It encompasses "events, experiences, sufferings, emotions, and attributes; ... as pathos, the will-to-power signifies the immediate world in which we are at all times thoroughly embodied, a world of living sensuous relations that are the material limits and possibilities of willing.... In Nietzsche's words, 'there is an essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions, although "adaptation" [to historical conditions of existence] follows only after this.'" Warren, 130; 144 (quote from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, edited, translated and annotated by Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1968], sec. 2, pp. 12, 79)

moment of overpowering emotion that one comes to doubt the existence and feels the power to **replace him** in oneself.

The story of Gilles and Dora's love is, as all great love stories are meant to be, a tragic one. She leaves for the United States, never to come back. He understands that she has just played with him, and used him to work out **her** own independence and come to terms with herself. The realization is devastating to Gilles, especially as he is used to being the one leaving lovers behind. It will be many months and much struggling before the miracle happens again, but this time, Gilles is even more prepared. It happens in sun-drenched Algeria, the enchanted land where he's moved after renouncing his position at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There, he meets a former prostitute, Pauline, and once again falls in love with her. He finds himself completely overwhelmed by the purity and simplicity that his love for her brings: "Ils tombaient dans les bras l'un de l'autre, épouvantés et ravis, attestant que cela pouvait finir parce que c'était déjà passé dans l'éternel." (*G*, 532) Once again, Drieu would revert to a religious and mystic vocabulary to better relate the emotional state of his protagonist. He insists that in the perfect union with Pauline, Gilles has come to reevaluate the meaning of happiness. The evocation of eternity suggests that Gilles' love for Pauline is intransient. As such, it is strongly reminiscent of religious devotion. In the tender descriptions which follow, we discern a particular need for the divine, the spiritual, the unearthly, in other words, once again, that which surpasses the quotidian. Being near his beloved brings Gilles a feeling of plenitude, of perfection: "[I]l était au comble de la plénitude." (*ibid*) What's more, the narrator would hasten to add that this completeness is far from ordinary happiness, or happiness such as it is experienced on the ordinary level of existence: "Ne parlons pas de



bonheur. On lui aurait demandé, 'Etes-vous heureux', il aurait détourné la tête." (ibid)

The reason why the ordinary concept of happiness does not suffice to explain the feeling of happiness is that Gilles has finally gotten rid of his ambition. He no longer strives towards achievement, and is able to experience the moment." [P]our lui le bien, c'était cette absence totale de but, cette suspension élastique au-dessus des abîmes de l'indicible immobilité. Moins elle avait de but et plus sa vie prenait du sens." (ibid)

It is imperative that we point out that, in the quote above, what Gilles takes issue with is not so much the need to have a goal, but rather, the meaningfulness of the majority of people's dreams and aspirations. When in love, he is preoccupied by the intensity of his feelings. It doesn't even occur to him to be bothered by other people. Once again, an immediate parallel with war surfaces: "Il retrouvait cet état de grâce qu'il avait connu dans les tranchées. » (ibid) War, much like love, instantly remind him of the uniqueness of his experience on Earth. As it is the ultimate slaughterhouse of human life, it also makes one think about the singularity of every human being and the miracle of the existence of every individual: "Révélation, en ce lieu éprouvant, de la vérité que chaque être est d'une particularité irremplaçable, et pétale dans la touffe, est assuré par la délicate perfection de son dessin, de son importance infinie au regard du créateur. » (ibid)

## V.

In the opinion of most critics, Part One of *Gilles* constitutes the most successful section of the novel. Even though I recognize Drieu's artistic mastery, revealed in the skillful juxtaposition of two contrasting realms – war and civilian life, I am convinced that *La Permission* simply begins to delineate the major themes of the novel. In my opinion, it is Chapter Three that contains the key to understanding the novel, as it exposes in a rather succinct manner the three most important aspects of *Gilles* and demonstrates the ways in which they hinge on one another. On the one hand, it reiterates the protagonist's desire to distance himself from ordinary existence. On the other, it identifies the only reasonable alternative in the extraordinary sensation provided by the war. Section Three shows a wiser, older Gilles, a man, capable of renouncing the petty goals which drive most people. It likewise addresses the possibility of realizing the unique potential coded in everyone's life, the possibility of creating a work of art. It is only in art that one is allowed to live according to laws which one devises by oneself. It is the only situation in which we do not feel compelled to conform to the expectations of society. It is also the moment in which one is strangely aware of one's existence. Once again, we can trace it back to the extraordinary experience that is the war:

Il avait souri, mais n'avait pas alors remarqué que seule pouvait s'imposer à lui cette métaphysique d'artiste pour donner forme à son cri intime. A cet instant ponctué d'un coup de canon, il avait l'intuition d'un coup de canon, il avait l'intuition d'un univers où les mots "particulier, unique, irremplaçable" pouvaient seuls signifier les frémissements de la vérité." (G, 533)

The desire to go beyond conventional existence prompts Gilles to invent a system of beliefs which can be referred to as his own religion. The radical novelty of the invention is signaled by the new name, which he coins for his experience – “Je t’appelle Eulalie, chaque chose demande un nom particulier. Et toute ma vie je témoignerai qu’Eulalie a vécu.” (ibid) The choice of appellation is by no means arbitrary. First of all, it’s the name of a female, and as such offers a direct reference to the intimate link existing between falling in love and finding oneself in the privileged state of awareness which Gilles revels in. At the same time, the sound of the name unmistakably refers the reader to the word *eulogy*, praise, gratitude, recognition, tribute, panegyric – as well as a subtle evocation of mortality, as eulogies are praises sung to the dead. Thus, in one final image, we see the essence of the whole novel: the horrifying emptiness of contingent existence can only be surmounted through heroism and love.

**“Ma vie visible ne fut que feintes bien masqués”<sup>170</sup>**

**Jean Genet’s *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* (1944) and *Miracle de la Rose* (1946)**

## I.

Jean Genet is one of the most seductive and magnetic personae of French literature. His novels and plays combine scandalous imagery, apology of crime and extolling of deviant behavior with a rich and poetic style. They have fascinated literary critics, specialists in philosophy, psychoanalysis and women and gender studies alike. The writer’s highly eventful and non-conformist life, his stints in a number of correctional facilities, his overt homosexuality, his shameless and unapologetic description of the life of transgendered Montmartre, his fascination with the Black Panthers movement in the US and his subsequent sympathy for the Palestinian Liberation Army have all fueled inexhaustible interpretations. Critical acclaim of Genet spans a rather impressive spectrum and presents a number of contradictory readings of the ensemble of his writings.

The sheer volume of Genet criticism to date is such that it would be impossible to do it justice in a study of this size.<sup>171</sup> Suffice it to say that it ranges from interpretations,

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<sup>170</sup> Jean Genet, *Un Captif amoureux*

<sup>171</sup> In addition to the two major works discussed below, Georges Bataille and Lucien Goldmann also wrote influential studies. Georges Bataille’s “L’Echec de Genet,” is part of the collection of essays *La littérature*

largely based on parallels between the writer's adventure-filled life and his oeuvre,<sup>172</sup> to a tentative to disregard concrete biographical references in favor of studying his work as a self-standing literary artifact.<sup>173</sup> The present analysis will consider Genet's two earliest

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*et le mal*, op. cit. Lucien Goldmann's essay is part of *Structures mentales et creation culturelle*, op.cit., 267-302. We should also mention Helene Cixous' acknowledgment of Genet whom she considered one of only three modern French authors writing in the feminine mode. Cixous mentions him alongside Colette and Duras ("Le rire de la Meduse," op. cit., 39-54.)

<sup>172</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, which comes out in 1952, is the first and most exhaustive book, conceived along those lines. The monumental study positions Genet's writing as the artist's revenge upon a world which has rejected him. Part biography and part literary analysis, this impressive treatise explains the content of the novels by tracing inspiration in concrete instances of their author's life. Despite the fact that many of Sartre's claims have, in the subsequent decades, been disproved, *Saint Genet* remains an impressive work which provides a good departure point into Genet's complex universe.

It is a well-known fact that Genet himself found Sartre's study absolutely distressing. In a revealing interview with *Playboy* magazine dating from 1964, he would admit that he had needed a lot of time in order to recover from reading the novel. The impact of *Saint Genet* had been such that it had put him off from writing. He insists that Sartre's book had left a void in him and led to a sort of psychological meltdown. Genet estimates that it took him approximately six years to get over his shock and go back to writing. ("Playboy Interview with Madeleine Gobeil." *Playboy*. April 1964: 45-53, 48. The writer approved the typed transcript. Henceforth referred to as *Playboy*)

<sup>173</sup> If, at the risk of oversimplification we can say that the Sartrean analysis looks for clues, which help us make sense of Genet's oeuvre through analyzing events from his life, the other landmark inquiry into the Jean Genet phenomenon – Derrida's *Glas* (1974) adopts a completely different approach. Contrary to Sartre's reading, Derrida insists that the artwork and a human being's lives should not be considered simultaneously. He maintains that not just Genet's but any writer's oeuvre should by all means be read independently of any real-life experiences which may have inspired them. For Derrida, the artwork is characterized by what he would refer to as a triple absence. On the one hand, there is the absence of the author. The latter has no control over his creation once it has been completed. On the other hand, the individual to whom the artwork is designated (Derrida calls him the *destinaire* and insists upon the

novels, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1944) and *Miracle de la rose* (1946). Written within a relatively short period of time, the two have much in common. Their plots overlap and certain characters from the earlier novel reappear in the second one. Most importantly, however, the two books share the tentative to exalt crime, ridicule punishment and redefine the very meaning of conventional morality. Since both of these works have undoubtedly been inspired by (heavily hyperbolized and embellished) occurrences in Genet's life, some attention is paid to the biographical elements. However, my analysis explores the ways in which the novels interpret and transform these events rather than elaborate on the existing analogies which might explain these artistic choices.

*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* depict a world ordinary individuals have no access to. The pages of the novels are populated exclusively by criminals and their collaborators and lovers – people who exist outside the norms of the law. The protagonists incarnate a wide range of transgressions. The glorious terms in

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destinaire's not necessarily being the reader) is also missing. The outside perceptions, life experiences and interpretations they might bring are also considered irrelevant. Last but not least, the artwork is characterized by an "absence of the truth." Derrida is skeptical about the work of art's ability to teach us any universal truths. Thus, in *Glas*, Genet's oeuvre is depicted as completely disengaged from any considerations, and existing solely in and for itself.

It is important to signal here a problem with both *Glas* and *Saint Genet*. In the words of Robert Harvey, "Sartre, and Derrida ... would create for Genet - but even more importantly for themselves - an object of devotion called "Genet," a sort of writerly fetish for whatever a "real" Genet might have been, a textual ersatz that would serve as Sartre's and Derrida's "captive lover." (Harvey, 105). Unfortunately, this is a danger any critic of Genet's oeuvre runs, for the writer was a truly mesmerizing individual. In order to minimize this risk, the present study attempts to stay as close to the texts as possible and resist the temptation of making too many assumptions about the ways in which Genet's life might have been translated in his novels.

which they are painted suggests that, in the universe they inhabit, the life of crime and disregard for pre-established societal norms is considered a superior form of existence. Thus, both novels present a reality which, at first glance, bears little resemblance to the ordinary human condition. Genet's characters live their lives in the most unapologetic of manners. Paradoxically, they still inspire the respect, admiration and envy of the denizens of their own peculiar world and of mainstream individuals and the defenders of the law alike.

The present chapter opens with a rather detailed analysis of Genet's style and some of the literary and philosophical influences which helped shape it. Subsequently, we move to an exploration of the three key obsessions, essential for understanding Jean Genet's highly complicated and intertwined microcosm: sacrilege, sovereignty and sexuality. We conclude with a dissection of the ways in which those three come together to construct what might tentatively be called the Genetian world outlook. The latter constitutes an ethical and aesthetic system of values which allows us to inscribe Genet within the larger framework of my analysis, namely, the "immoral" writer's celebration of life.

## II.

"Souvent il fait la figure qu'il enseigne; et en parlant du Sublime,  
il est lui – même très sublime."<sup>174</sup>

Boileau on Longinus

Both *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* are novels written by an incarcerated man, within the context and the reality of prison. Critics have gone as far as to suggest that Genet, by virtue of his unusual life circumstances, was permanently bound in a system of incarceration. Writes Steven Barber,

The surrendering of the infant Genet to the French state made him a captive ... from the age of seven months; even the arrangement of the unmarried mothers' beds in the Tarnier clinic [where the author was born] had resembled a carceral system of cells under surveillance, and Genet's first seven months with his mother in Paris, certainly in poverty and desperation, became a provisional release before he was irreparably drawn back into the domain of the Public Assistance. Genet's virulent hatred of the French authorities – and of France itself, and of its language, against and in which he would suggest his own language – began at the moment of his birth. But it would be a necessary, lifelong hatred.<sup>175</sup>

While the infant's awareness of its immediate surroundings, as well as the ways in which they shape its world outlook are certainly open to discussion, it is certain that Genet's fiction constitutes a revisiting of the familiar relationship between the creative act and

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<sup>174</sup> "Traite du sublime, ou du merveilleux dans le discours," in his *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 333

<sup>175</sup> Barber, op. cit., 16-17



physical imprisonment. The correlation is a familiar one in French literature. Two centuries earlier, it had already been explored at great length. We find it at the heart of Marquis de Sade's fiction. Much like Sade, Genet started writing while in prison. On the page, he poured his rage, helplessness and looked for ways to satisfy his complex and devouring fantasies.<sup>176</sup> But his creative energy was not confined to the times when he was in prison. Decades after he served his last sentence, Genet would claim that writing constituted the only meaningful activity not only in prison, but in existence in general: "Most of our activities have the vagueness and vacantness of a tramp's existence. We very rarely make a conscious effort to transcend this state. I transcend it by writing."<sup>177</sup>

In addition to the indisputable parallelism which can be established with Sade, Genet also reads like a modern-day Francois Villon. Like the poet, he is constantly meditating upon the standoff between crime and honor, pleasure and punishment. (The first poem – indeed the first work of art Genet composed in prison, was called "Le condamné à mort", and evokes the Medieval poet's "Testament"). Much like Villon, the

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<sup>176</sup> Almost a quarter of a century after the publication of the novel, the author would describe, for *Playboy* magazine, the peculiar way in which he composed his first novel.

We were given paper with which to make bags. It was on that brown paper that I wrote the beginning of the book. I never thought it would be read. I thought I'd never get out of prison. I wrote sincerely, with fire and rage, and all the more freely because I was certain the book would never be read. One day we went from La Santé prison to the Paris Law Court. When I got back to my cell, the manuscript was gone. I was called down to the warden's office and was punished: three days of solitary confinement, and bread and water for having used paper 'that wasn't intended for literary masterpieces'. I felt belittled by the warden's robbery. I ordered some notebooks at the canteen, got into bed, pulled the covers over my head and tried to remember, word for word, the fifty pages I had written. I think I succeeded. (*Playboy*, 50)

<sup>177</sup> *Playboy*, 51

novelist recognizes that, despite the limitation of individual freedom, prison allows one the luxury of reflecting upon the situation one finds oneself in. Since serving a sentence implies finding oneself outside of normal daily routine, one does not need to participate actively in the quotidian. Hence, one has all the time in the world to reflect upon the past. This is a luxury, virtually unknown in everyday life.

It is clear that, from the very beginning, the narrator of *Notre Dame des Fleurs* would consider a life of reflection and meditation superior to one of daily activity. “[T]out évènement de notre vie n’a d’importance que la résonance qu’il trouve en nous, que le degré qu’il nous fait franchir vers l’ascétisme” (*NDdF*, 263),<sup>178</sup> he observes. As the quote demonstrates, above and beyond the immediate circumstances which have led to imprisonment, a detainee of quality seeks wisdom and understanding. What’s more, ascending to it while incarcerated appears easier than in any other situation. In the midst of silence and privation, man is reduced to his simplest elements. In the midst of silence and privation, man is reduced to his simplest elements. As critic Françoise d’Eaubonne puts it, one is free to seek “the metaphysical essence of all possible Good and of all possible Evil, without any relationship to how judges - and ruffians – may understand them.”<sup>179</sup> Let us not forget that the true sage, the man worthy of universal admiration always lives away from other human beings. Similarly, Genet’s glorified prisoners seem to suggest that growth of self and independence of spirit and soul are only possible when one finds oneself in isolation.

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<sup>178</sup> All references come from the 1976 Folio edition of the novel, op. cit. Henceforth abbreviated as *NDdF*

<sup>179</sup> Françoise d’Eaubonne, “Jean Genet, or, The Inclement Thief”. In Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern, op.cit., Henceforth referred to as Brooks / Halpern, 58

The reader who has had relatively little exposure to Genet's novels is almost certainly shocked by this glorious depiction of prison inmates and their need for spiritual reflection. After all, this is not how we picture those who break the law. The discrepancy between the rich inner life of the criminals and their position vis-à-vis conventional society lies, to be sure, at the very core of Jean Genet's literary oeuvre. But even before taking in the shock caused by Genet's extraordinary characters, as well as the author's extolling of the merits of a life of crime and incarceration, the reader is fascinated and mesmerized by Genet's prose. It would not be an exaggeration if we said that, among the six authors we are considering, his style is the richest and most ornamented. It successfully combines the bold and vigorous argot of the prisons and of shady Montmartre, with the classical expression reminiscent of some of the finest examples of French literature. Therefore, it seems to me that, before investing any time in detangling the highly controversial (and hopelessly intertwined) Genetian Holy Trinity of sacrilege – sovereignty – sexuality, we must first of all shed some light over his style and understand the literary influences which shaped it.

Genet's narrative can best be qualified as syncopated. It consists of a series of interlocking fragments, which have much in common with the cinematographic technique employed in his films from the 1950s.<sup>180</sup> Critic Brigid Brophy points out that these

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<sup>180</sup> The leading article in the issue of the magazine *Theatre au cinéma* devoted to Genet presents a succinct and eloquent description of the very discontinuity which is so characteristic of his novels:

Le territoire de Genet est discontinu: Il présente des failles, des hauts, des bas, des ruptures, de soudaines désaffections. Patiemment, il construit des décors qu'il abandonne soudain, laissant les acteurs aliénés et orphelins. Il est dévoué, fidèle, généreux, soumis en apparence à l'aimé mais en même temps changeant, possessif, exigeant, capable de dureté et de cruauté. Cette discontinuité a

fragments constitute “a funeral wreath [which constitutes of] part meditation, part memory, part masturbation.”<sup>181</sup> While the fragment is the building block of each one of the novels in this study,<sup>182</sup> Genet’s are the only ones which deliberately obfuscate the logical temporal progression of the events narrated. As Steven Barber points out, Genet’s idiosyncratic use of the fragments was due to the abruptness of visual and sensory revelations they provided him with. The writer appreciated “[the] articulatory lucidity that came from [...] density and the concentration of its textual elements; this kind of intentional fragmentation possessed the power to project an idea or an image with shattering precision, like that contained by a cry of exclamation.”<sup>183</sup> Moreover, as every

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tendance, néanmoins, à se répéter; elle obéit à des cycles subtils et aléatoires, elle acquiert au fil des ans une mystérieuse cohérence. (*Theatres au Cinéma*, 69)

<sup>181</sup> Brigid Brophy, “Our Lady of the Flowers”, In Brooks / Halpern, 70

<sup>182</sup> In her analysis on Céline, Julia Kristeva identifies the fragment as the predominant mode of expression of post-World War Two French literature. “Céline ancre définitivement ... le destin de la littérature dans ce dernier territoire, qui n’est pas celui de la Mort de Dieu mais la reconduction, *en style*, de ce que Dieu recouvre » (Kristeva, Julia. *Essai sur l’abjection*, op.cit., 157) Germaine Bree, for example, has recently remarked that “at present the major literary forms, in France at least, do seem to be the ‘fragment’ and the ‘book.’” (Germaine Bree, op.cit., 13.) Julia Kristeva, in her study of Lautréamont and Mallarmé, situates and traces the break-up of traditional genres, as well as that of the traditional “langage poétique,” in the nineteenth century:

Une nouvelle économie signifiante est en train de se dégager, qui commence par contester la normativité phrastique-narrative, en y introduisant le rythme et la polysémie poétique. Mais il ne s’agit plus de l’ancienne poésie, contrepartie de la narration linéarisante qui réfléchissait la syntaxe linéaire. Cette nouvelle poésie n’est ni poétique ni prosaïque: elle amène déjà son rythme dans la ligne syntaxique, et en ce sens elle poétise la prose.... Un genre nouveau naît dans ces mutations, un nouveau type de langage: le texte. (Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, op. cit., 289.)

<sup>183</sup> Barber, 94

fragment inscribes a universe of its own, unity is achieved in no small measure through the contribution of the reader, whose responsibility is to link the pieces together.

The truncating of the narrative allows for the harmonious coexistence of two contrasting ways of expression. The unique combination of slang and high-brow phrases is thereby rendered not only possible, but also highly appropriate. It is for this reason that we can say that Genet successfully combines Céline's street-talk and Nabokov's high flown rhetoric. What's more, his style plays with the ultimate collapse, coming together of binary oppositions in order to provoke what Roland Barthes calls the ultimate demise of the bourgeois consciousness. Writes Barthes, « [L'écriture] ... atteint aujourd'hui, un dernier avatar, l'absence ... in peut facilement discerner le mouvement même d'une négation [...] comme si la Littérature ne trouvait plus de pureté que dans l'absence de tout signe [...] c'est le dernier épisode d'une Passion de l'écriture, qui suit pas à pas le déchirement de la conscience bourgeoise. »<sup>184</sup> Genet, interested in scandalizing and shocking mainstream sensibilities, explored this tentative throughout his oeuvre.

Let us consider, briefly, the two main components of Genet's narrative style starting with the infamous – and inimitable – argot. The way in which the characters talk constitutes, according to Gisèle Bickel, a true *mise en abyme*.<sup>185</sup> It keeps reminding us, on a purely linguistic level, that we are dealing with people who exist on the fringes of society. Bickel sees the language of Genet's novels as a “violation, a rape, an affirmation of strength, as well as something which is not subject to change or discussion.”<sup>186</sup> Even though it can be understood by anyone, this language cannot be spoken by all. The

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<sup>184</sup> Barthes, *Degré Zéro de l'écriture*, 9-10

<sup>185</sup> Bickel, 70-72

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*

special argot of prisoners does not lend itself to members of the outside world. What's more, as we will subsequently see, the ways in which the prisoners and their entourage express themselves carry unmistakable sexual innuendos. Sex and talking are virtually inseparable in *Notre Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*. This is in part due to the fact that, while incarcerated, the prisoners are incapable of having sex, and need to resort to expressing their desire for one another verbally. Once out of prison, language becomes a part of the process of seduction. Owing to its invocative and arousing aspects, speech as an extension of the sexual act.<sup>187</sup> Last but not least, as Steven Barber claims, talking is a form of opposition to established order: "The seething corporeal forces of sex and subdued rebellion (each projected by an urgent sensory language between the young inmates) would remain a primary obsession for Genet throughout his life."<sup>188</sup>

We will notice that Genet reverts to prison argot whenever he describes the daily occurrences and dealings of his characters. I would like to insist upon this type of speech characterizing just the quotidian. When the narrator interprets the very same daily occurrences and reflects upon their significance, quite the opposite rhetorical register is used. Instead of shocking, graphic and colloquial, the speech is sophisticated, delicate and poetic. In the preface to his article titled "La poésie comme salut", Bernard Delvaille

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<sup>187</sup> Writers of the *Tel Quel* movement, such as Sollers, Pleyne, and Denis Roche would translate the irregular and convulsive motions of a language inseparable from the corporeal functions: "The anchoring point for the text [. . .] is the body [. . .] The deep and incessant bodily work in which we are involved goes far beyond mere decoration to reach something else entirely; and if this work reveals itself through sexuality, the latter is then identified in its turn with 'writing' as production and annulling, ceaseless living and dying, transplants, orgasms, and meanings" (For a more in-depth analysis, see Mary Ann Caws "Review: *Tel Quel: Text & Revolution*", op. cit.)

<sup>188</sup> Barber, 25

writes, “L’œuvre poétique de Genet, stricto sensu, est fort mince: pas plus de six poèmes. Mais ses romans sont traversés de fulgurances dignes des plus beaux vers.”<sup>189</sup> Indeed, poetry and prose go hand in hand for Genet, who appeared obsessed with seizing the instant in which the two intertwined to become almost indistinguishable. Poetry is born out of the prose, and prose becomes a poem. For Genet, poetry is not just a creative act, but also a form of salvation and redemption. Argot defines the quotidian and is reserved for it. He would revert to exquisite poetry whenever he talks about the sublime occurrences, thereby, following a tradition of matching the style to the occasion.

There is no doubt that the skillful blending of poetry and argot render Genet’s style highly idiosyncratic. He writes like nobody else. It will be helpful, however, to trace some of the literary influences in Genet’s oeuvre. Critic Keith Botsford places Genet in a long lineage of writers who painted a disturbing picture of mankind, matched only by the kind of revelations he made about the human psyche. Writes Botsford,

Genet is not merely exposing a phenomenon to us, a world of crime and sexual perversion: he is warning us of what lies just beyond us, of what Baudelaire saw, what Rimbaud saw, what Joyce saw, and Pirandello and Hesse. How narrow we would have to be to see Genet only as love and murder, when his real subject is the world, politics, ethics, freedom . . . and love and murder.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Delvaille, Bernard. “La poésie comme salut”, op. cit., 61. Further, Delvaille would state that [Il voulait] saisir l’instant où de la prose naît la poésie, où la prose se fait poème, telle fut son obsession.”

<sup>190</sup> Botsford, 83

Genet's tumultuous biography, as well as his overt homosexuality, invite an almost immediate parallel with Arthur Rimbaud. This semblance was remarked upon relatively early on, and was insisted upon for reasons which had, objectively speaking, little to do with the literary merits of Genet's art. Jean Cocteau famously addressed the judges at Genet's trial, stating: "He is Rimbaud, one can not sentence Rimbaud."<sup>191</sup> But the parallels run much deeper than that. Keith Botsford identifies Rimbaud as one of Genet's "masters" and goes on to point out that the two shared the "passionate precipitation into the flesh and the world of love ineluctably required a mystical fusion of poetry and death whose silence too, after Rimbaud has said all he had to say, after he had exhausted his rebellion, must have urged Genet, who had tried all the other forms of self-destruction, from love to crime, to the same death for his art."<sup>192</sup> As we shall subsequently see, the symbol of the boat, which immediately calls to mind Rimbaud's *bateau ivre*, is an image we find at the core of the narrative in *Miracle de la rose*. Genet admired Rimbaud's

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<sup>191</sup> In 1946, Genet is a recidivist. He has been convicted of theft twelve times, and faces a lifetime in prison. His fellow writers, and most notably Cocteau, organize his defense. Kihm tells the episode in *Jean Cocteau, l'homme et ses miroirs*:

Surrounded by Jeannot [Marais] and Paul [Morihién], Cocteau takes a seat in the first row. The dialog ... recalls the conciseness of Joan of Arc's trial ... Counselor Maurice Garçon declares: "My client is ending one career, that of thief, in order to begin another, that of writer." He reads aloud a letter from Cocteau: "My dear Garçon, I entrust to you G, who steals to feed his body and soul. He is Rimbaud, one can not sentence Rimbaud." Judge Patouillard, who has just given the maximum to a truck driver who stole a sack of flour, but who is not Rimbaud, lowers his head, and G is acquitted. Jean Cocteau has just won the trial of unmitigated anti-conformity. (Kihm, 276)

<sup>192</sup> Botsford, 82



powerful poetic expression, which could put both chaos and violence into words.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, one of the (male) characters in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* says, “Je suis *une autre*”, thus likewise evoking Rimbaud’s immortal adage, “Je est un autre.”<sup>194</sup>

Genet’s fascination with evil, as well as his awe for, and penchant for describing the ungainly, horrifying and plain ugly aspects of existence immediately make us see the ways in which he was influenced by Baudelaire. Critic Brigid Brophy opens her chapter on Genet by stating that he is Baudelaire – “not an imitator of his, but the poet himself, every bit as original and belonging to the Twentieth rather than the Nineteenth century.”<sup>195</sup> Despite the author’s claims that he rarely read anything and was virtually auto-didactic, it is clear that he knew and admired the nineteenth-century poet from a young age. René de Bruxeuil, the blind composer with whom he spends several months in the capacity of a secretary and aide, remembers that the young Genet had “mutilated” his copy of *Les Fleurs du mal* by tearing out the pages he was especially fond of.<sup>196</sup> And Georges Bataille’s assessment, “Genet s’est proposé une recherché du Mal comme d’autres celle du Bien”<sup>197</sup> is well supported by the author’s own writings:

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<sup>193</sup> For more information on the parallels between the two authors, see Abigail Israel’s “The Aesthetic of Violence”, op. cit. Israel’s article deals primarily with the similarities between *Illuminations* and Genet’s plays *Les Paravents* et *Les Negres*.

<sup>194</sup> Curiously, Genet himself, speaking of Cocteau and Sartre’s analyses of his oeuvre, inadvertently states (to Cocteau), “Toi et Sartre, vous m’avez statufié. Je suis un autre. Il faut que cet autre trouve quelque chose à dire. » (Quoted in *Magazine littéraire*, 20)

<sup>195</sup> Brophy attacks the entire Sartrean reading and claims it has no credibility, for he has failed to discover this fundamental resemblance. Article quoted in Brooks / Halpern, 68

<sup>196</sup> In Dichy / Fouché, 89

<sup>197</sup> Bataille, *La littérature et le mal*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957. Henceforth referred to as Bataille, 127

Le poète s'occupe du mal. C'est son rôle de voir la beauté qui s'y trouve, de l'en extraire (ou d'y mettre celle qu'il désire, par orgueil ?) et de l'utiliser. L'erreur intéresse le poète, puisque l'erreur seule enseigne la vérité. ... Tuer un homme, c'est le symbole du Mal. Tuer sans que rien compense cette perte de vie, c'est le Mal. C'est le Mal absolu. Rarement j'emploie ce dernier mot car il m'effraye, mais il me paraît s'imposer. Or les métaphysiciens le diront, les absolus ne s'ajoutent pas. Atteint une fois grâce au meurtre – qui en est le symbole – le Mal rend soudainement inutiles tous autres actes mauvais. Mille cadavres ou un seul, c'est pareil. C'est l'état du péché mortel dont on ne se sauvera plus. On peut aligner les corps si l'on a les nerfs assez forts, mais la répétition les calmera.<sup>198</sup>

The notion of evil for Genet is instrumental for the understanding of transgression, a concept repeated *ad nauseum* in all analyses of his oeuvre, including this one. It is, on the one hand, all that effectively counterbalances *good* and *right*. But at the same time, it is also the transformation of that evil into a work of art. "Transgression," Bataille writes, "only exists from the moment art itself appears."<sup>199</sup>

Genet's most manifest literary debt, however, is without a doubt to Marcel Proust and the latter's *magnum opus*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. According to Genet himself, he discovered *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* at around the same time he wrote *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, while he was in prison. In an interview with Hubert Fichte, Genet recalls his impressions of the opening sentence of Proust's novel:

Et quand j'ai fini la phrase, j'ai fermé le livre et je me suis dit : Maintenant, je suis tranquille, je sais que je vais aller de merveille en merveille. La première phrase était si

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<sup>198</sup> In *Magazine littéraire*, op. cit., 42

<sup>199</sup> "La transgression ... n'existe que au moment où l'art lui-même se manifeste". Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, 41

dense, si belle que cette aventure était une première grande flamme qui annonçait un grand brasier. Et j'ai mis à peu près toute la journée à m'en remettre. Je n'ai rouvert le livre que le soir, et en effet, je n'ai été que de merveille en merveille, ensuite.<sup>200</sup>

Alain Buisine's article titled « Proust et Genet, floralies en tous genres, » presents us with one of the most thorough explorations of the parallels between the two authors. Buisine analyzes the flower imagery, found at the core of the novel. Proust and Genet use flowers both in physical descriptions and as analogies to the actions of the characters. Let us take a look at just two examples among many. In the initial description of Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, the protagonist of the first novel, we discover that he has « le caractère physique et moral de fleur » (*NDdF*, 125). This, in turn, causes Divine, the transgendered prostitute and self-appointed queen of Montmartre, to fall in love with him. When this same Divine walks, it looks as though she is throwing flowers around herself. It is clear that Genet, imitating Proust, is taking full advantage of the vast array of connotations and symbolic meanings traditionally associated with flowers. The latter become symbols of either the transsexual or the criminal – the two main varieties of humanity we encounter on the pages of the novels.<sup>201</sup> By representing young god-like creatures as flowers, Genet

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<sup>200</sup> « Entretien avec Hubert Fichte », in *L'Ennemi declare*, op. cit., 165-6

<sup>201</sup> In his seminal study *The Golden Bough*, Frazer points out that in primitive societies, flowers were sometimes portrayed as the external soul of the human being. He quotes a German fairy tale in which a sister and her brothers are portrayed in this manner. (Frazer, 351-380) According to the concept of the external soul, the most important aspect of anybody resides outside of the mortal body. By attacking it, one can actually annihilate the whole individual. To quote Frazer, “Thus the idea that the soul may be deposited for a longer or shorter time in some place of security outside the body ... is found in the popular tales of many races”. It is important to point out that many of the stories in which the essence of the human being is located outside of the physical body are rooted in French folklore. It is reasonable to assume that Genet was

inscribes his work into a long tradition, dating back to Antiquity. Much like in Greek mythology, the beautiful criminals are doomed to perish young and at the height of their perfection. Genet consciously emulates the mythological tales in his own writing, intertwining homosexuality, lust, violence and death.<sup>202</sup> Harcamone, Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, Bulkaen and a score of others are barely in their twenties whenever they die. Flowers, some of the most fragile embodiments of living matter, provide a further appropriate analogy with the criminal, for, like them, the condemned “accepts” the ephemeral nature of existence and understands that he will have a short life cycle. And, last but not least, flowers have a double nature - rooted in the ground, they are likewise turned upwards for light and sustenance. Thus, they appropriately fit with Genet’s obsession with the duality of existence and the constant oscillation between satisfying the cravings of the body and those of the soul.

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familiar with them. Furthermore, these tales usually feature a protagonist who is a maiden in captivity, who is usually kept in a tower of sorts.

<sup>202</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid reminds us that Artemis punished Narcissus for his vanity and cruelty towards his lovers by making him fall in love while denying him love's consummation. At Donacon in Thespia, he comes upon a spring, clear as silver. As he sat down, exhausted, on the grassy verge to slake his thirst, he fell in love with his reflection. At first he tried to embrace and kiss the beautiful boy who confronted him. Once he realizes that this is his own reflection, he lay gazing enraptured into the pool, hour after hour. The grief, caused by the impossibility to possess and not to possess at the same time was destroying him. Finally, he plunged a dagger in his breast and bled to death. He was only 16. (Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, 402-510). And in the *Iliad*, we read the story of beautiful youth Hyacinthus, a Spartan prince. The poet Thamyris, the first man who ever wooed one of his own sex, fell in love with him, as did Apollo himself, the first god to do so. Unfortunately, the West Wind had also taken a fancy to Hyacinthus, and became insanely jealous of Apollo. One day, as the god was teaching the boy how to hurl a discus, the West Wind caught it in mid-air, dashed it against Hyacinthus's skull, and killed him. (*Iliad*, ii, 596-600). The memory of both young men was preserved in the graceful, beautiful flowers which bear their names.

The ways in which Proust and Genet evoke their respective childhoods allows us to see further parallels between the two. *A la recherche du temps perdu* paints a dream-like childhood which, at first glance, bears little resemblance to the structured and rigorous one Genet had at the children's prison in Mettray.<sup>203</sup> Yet there are doubtless similarities. The avenue of chestnut trees in Mettray makes one think of the famous hawthorn path in *Swann's Way*. We also see that the failure to remember an episode, a face, a phrase torment Genet as much as they do Proust: When Divers, a fellow-prisoner, reminds Jean of another delinquent of their generation, one Villeroy, Jean is confused and vexed. He has forgotten his old comrade altogether, and the agitation prevents him from falling asleep. Furthermore, Proust and Genet's narrators share similar experiences with involuntary memory as an attempt to descend to the depths of time and search for meaning there. Buisine and Bernard Moraly, among others, are convinced that Genet rewrites the Proustian narrative by paraphrasing, cutting, pasting, demystifying, desacralizing, rendering it profane and scandalous.<sup>204</sup> Nothing surprising about that, as it is also Proust who has taught us that profanation is inseparable from adoration.

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<sup>203</sup> Genet was a pensioner at this detention facility for juvenile delinquents between September 2, 1926 and March 1, 1929.

<sup>204</sup> For more information on the ways in which Proust influences Genet, see Jean-Bernard Moraly, *Jean Genet. La vie écrite*, ed de la Différence, 1988 and Alain Buisine, « Proust et Genet, floralies en tous genres », in *Magazine Littéraire*, op.cit., 42-44

### III.

If the notion of pedophilia is the one which would remain most striking in Nabokov's writing, and anti-Semitism can be said to constitute the chief offense against conventional morality in Drieu la Rochelle, it seems to me that the most significant transgression which Genet commits in *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* is that of blasphemy. The narration constantly parodies, challenges and offends the most basic tenets of the Christian tradition. It continuously derives imagery from Christianity in an attempt to subvert and ridicule bourgeois values. Thus, the books maintain a delicate and permanently shifting balance between **the sacred and the sacrilegious**

The overt irreverence begins with the very titles of the novels. *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* tells the life story of the eponymous criminal, a murderer who "borrows" an alias from a countless number of French churches. Appropriately, the opening sentence of the *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* states the intent to establish a link between transgression and religion by putting a criminal in the spotlight. It paints the curious picture of a man, who looks like combination between a nun and a wounded pilot: "Weidman vous apparut dans une édition de cinq heures, la tête emmaillotée de bandelettes blanches, religieuse et encore aviateur blessée." (*NDdF*, 9)<sup>205</sup> Similarly, *Miracle de la rose*, the title of the later one of the two novels, evokes one of the most mystical and fascinating notions of Catholicism, that of the miracle which bears testimony to God's unlimited power. The

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<sup>205</sup> Stewart and McGregor point out that Genet was imprisoned in the fall of 1937 and followed closely the arrest and conviction of the killer Eugène Weidmann. Some features of the latter's crimes and arrest have been incorporated into the narrative. For more information on this one and other "favorite" killers of Genet's, see Stewart / McGregor, pp 80-82

narrator of the novel by that name claims that a miracle of the same stature has been performed by a notorious criminal. Thus the titles of the two novels inscribe them within an immediately recognizable frame of reference, which, as the novels progress, will be distorted beyond recognition.

Notre-Dame des Fleurs, the protagonist of the first novel we will be dealing with, is distinguished by an extraordinary beauty, and is described as “pure” and “angelic”. However, contrary to what the name and his looks may suggest, Notre-Dame has been earning a living by theft, robbery, drug-dealing and prostitution. He has also killed two of his male lovers. It is no accident that his alias is that of a “Lady” and not that of, say, a male saint, as Notre-Dame is a notorious denizen of the transgender and homosexual universe of Montmartre. His fate is intricately intertwined with the stretch of boulevard “between Blanche and Pigalle” in which countless human beings of indeterminable gender make their home. Therefore, it is only appropriate that one not be able to tell whether he is male or female just by learning his name. Throughout the narrative, we are alternately reminded of Notre-Dame’s extraordinary beauty and his capacity for cruelty. The demonic and the angelic finally come together when the young man is caught red-handed after having killed his second victim. As two policemen walk into the room where Notre-Dame awaits them, half in terror and half in awe, incapable of covering the traces of his crime, the narrator observes, “

le visage de Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs est un visage si radieusement pur qu’immédiatement, et à quiconque, venait la pensée qu’il était faux, que cet ange devait être double, de flammes et de fumes, car chacun au moins une fois dans sa vie a eu

l'occasion de dire: "On lui aurait donné le bon Dieu sans confession" et veut à tout prix être plus roublard que le destin." (*NDdF*, 312)

The word "confession", pivotal point of the whole passage, is of utmost importance here. It is striking how many times we will see it repeated throughout the narrative, and how many of the quotidian experiences of the protagonists would be compared to it. For example, the two most irresistible criminals of the novel, Notre-Dame and Mignon-les-Petits-Pieds, become closer after starting to attend Mass at the Madeleine Church together. Afterwards, they get to talking and sharing the most intimate secrets of their lives. This moment will also be likened to confession. "Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs s'était couché sur un divan. Mignon, assis aux pieds, le regardait **se confesser**" (*NDdF*, 117, emphasis mine). It is clear that in this scene, which constitutes a veritable mixture of the erotic and the religious, desecrates a basic church sacrament.

Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs may have lent his poetic alias to the novel title, but he is far from being the only one to have a sobriquet which evokes religion directly. One of the Montmartre "tantes" is called Première communion. Arguably the most appealing and certainly the most memorable character of the novel, a transgendered male prostitute portrayed as a saint and a martyr, is named Divine. Divine is a magnanimous and self-effacing of the cruelty of the men she sincerely loves. Whole fragments of the novel, carried out in the tradition of the hagiographic narrative, establish a parallel between her and Christ. Relatively early, the narrator signals his intention to depict her in all her suffering, to strip her of all joy and transform her into a saint: "Lentement, mais sûrement, je veux la dépouiller de toute espèce de bonheur pour en faire une sainte" (*NDdF*, 78). The very description of the ways in which she interacts with her male lovers



(often compared to angels) abounds in religious undertones. The simple act of tea preparation and tea drinking (let no one be fooled – this is yet another unmistakable stab at Proust) is compared to a church ceremony: “Pour lors, ils boivent du thé et Divine sait bien qu’elle l’avale comme un pigeon l’eau claire. Comme le boirait, s’il buvait, le Saint-Esprit en forme de colombe” (*NDdF*, 56).

Loving and devoted to the men in her life, Divine will constantly be abused and taken advantage of. Her suffering will lead to emaciation and thus increase her physical resemblance to Christ himself: “Le soir même, déshabillée et seule dans le grenier, elle vit d’un oeil nouveau son corps blanc, sans un poil, lisse, sec, osseux par endroits. Elle en eut honte et s’empressa d’éteindre la lampe, car ce corps était celui d’ivoire de Jésus sur une croix du XVIIIe siècle, et des relations, une ressemblance même, avec la divinité ou son image, l’écœuraient” (*NDdF*, 127-8).

Divine, as well as the rest of Genet’s characters, is most often depicted through analogies and allegories. We are rarely given the traditional description which accompanies the introduction of a literary character. We don’t know where the people in Genet’s novels come from. We have virtually no information about their lives outside of a paradigm of confinement (Mettray, Fontevault, various prisons) or sexual transgression (Montmartre). The characters are almost never drawn in depth but, rather, resemble, a series of silhouettes or facades moving across a stage. They are brittle and one-dimensional astral figures. Furthermore, as they are at once male and female, they remind us of the figures of Minoan bullfighters and dancers.<sup>206</sup> Since they are allegories and not “real” people, they take on a vast array of functions. They are criminals, as well as saints,

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<sup>206</sup> The parallel was suggested by Knapp, *op.cit.*, 26

and their flexible forms and diverse reincarnations span the whole spectrum in between. Simultaneously generous, treacherous, helpful, gentle, cruel and loving, they move in and out of the narrative, “their singularity unexpectedly dissolving into their narrative frame”, as critic David H. Jones puts it.<sup>207</sup>

As we have had occasion to note, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* is constructed around the intricate parallelism between the outside representation of mainstream Christianity. It transforms the meaning and practice of the Catholic Mass, alludes to the physical resemblance of the protagonists to saints, angels and Jesus himself, and generally imitates the very rituals which underscore the sanctity of the religious exercise. In contrast, *Miracle de la rose*, which would appear a mere two years afterwards, is preoccupied with the profanation of two of the most intimate and inexplicable, as well as most spell-binding aspects of Christianity. It is built around the notions of heaven and transmutation of matter, or miracles. This difference is explained by the more limited setting of the novel. While the fragments of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* depict occurrences both in and outside of prison, in *Miracle de la rose*, the narration rarely goes beyond the walls of two different, yet in many ways complimentary penal communities – the prison at Fontevault and the correctional facility for young criminals in Mettray. In the confinement of the prison cell, the incarcerated have plenty of time to reflect upon their situation. Deprived of the possibility to act freely, they become fixated on the need to transform, to negate reality. As this can only be achieved in the realm of the imaginary, the need to conjure a miracle manifests itself and becomes an *idée fixe*. Thus, it looms large as the principal obsession of the narrator.

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<sup>207</sup> Jones, 17

Both correctional institutions, Mettray and Fontevrault, are glorified and represented as heavenly rather than earthly dwellings. The narrator's first impression upon entering Fontevrault reinforces the analogy. As he crosses its threshold (on Christmas Eve, no less), he is seized by the impression that he is in heaven: "Au sommet d'un perron élevé par deux marches, le mur était troué par une immense porte en plein cintre, toute illuminée." (*MR*, 13)<sup>208</sup> Subsequently, the novel would insist upon the intimate link which allows for a parallel between life at the heart of a prison cell and that in a religious community: Fontevrault is a converted abbey, and its former function fascinates the inmates: "Je ne chercherai pas à démêler l'essence de sa puissance sur nous: qu'elle la tienne de son passé, de ses abbesses filles de France, de son aspect, de ses murs" (*MR*, 9). The place itself is characterized by a certain gender ambiguity. A prison for males, it is supposed to be one of the most "masculine" and "virile" places imaginable. Nonetheless, it retains some characteristics of its former purpose, that of a nunnery. And as such, it is also a space in which homosexual love flourishes and is exalted in the most solemn and poetic of terms.

Mettray, the children's colony to which the narrator remains gently attached, is described in analogous terms. Quite similar to Fontevrault, it is, if anything, even more ephemeral and wondrous of a place. It is a magic castle, which does not quite belong to the Earth but rather, exhibits certain celestial characteristics: "Je ne puis trouver les mots qui vous la présenteraient soulevée du sol, portée par des nuages, comme les villes fortifiées des tableaux d'autrefois, suspendue entre ciel et terre et commençant une assomption éternelle" (*MR*, 75). Much later, in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, Genet would reminisce

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<sup>208</sup> All references come from the 1976 Folio edition of the novel, op. cit. Henceforth abbreviated as *MR*

about his own impressions of Mettray. He points out that, contrary to what one may suppose, the grounds of the colony were only separated by a wall of flowers. He would acknowledge that one of the finest inventions of the Colony of Mettray was to have known not to put a wall around it because it's much more difficult to escape if you have to cross a bed of flowers."<sup>209</sup> Once again – and in perfect symmetry to Fontevrault – the place is described as possessing both male and female characteristics, for the young members of the colony are cared for by nuns.

The two central events of the book are the two miracles, performed by the God of Fontevrault, a prisoner on death row by the name of Harcamone. While he is by no means a major character of the novel, it is important to understand the unique status he enjoys among the inmates. He has killed two people, a young girl and the guard at the prison where he was placed afterwards, for no apparent gain and with no premeditation. He has, to borrow Bataille's notion, performed a perfectly gratuitous act of violence. The girl was nice and gentle and permitted him to stroke her hair - he strangled her whenever she started resisting. As for the prison guard (bearing the mellifluous and fragrant name of Bois-dePP-Rose), he was the nicest one in the prison and certainly never did anything to provoke his killed. The narrator would insist that, in committing these crimes, Harcamone had only been inspired by a desire to kill in its purest, most primordial form.

Harcamone has been sentenced to capital punishment. The gravity and the irrevocability of his sentence have transformed him into a being which exists **outside** of the system. The *condamné à mort* is as good as dead. Therefore, he does not have to comply with the requests and the expectations of ordinary society. Kept in a prison cell

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<sup>209</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi Déclaré*, 223

on the top floor, Harcamone is also figuratively at the summit of the hierarchy of prisoners. He is kept in a prison cell on the top floor, inaccessible to the others. He descends among them only rarely, and his mere presence is spell-binding.

Harcamone performs his first miracle on a Sunday, the only day he is allowed to join the other inmates. The reason for his descent amongst the prison commoners is the most mundane one imaginable. He needs to get his nails cut. In front of the narrator's mesmerized gaze, the heavy chains which restrain the criminal are suddenly transformed into a garland of roses. The astonished admirer, who has proclaimed Harcamone as his God and idol, manages to cut one of the flowers and keep it, thus obtaining a piece of his divinity. This episode evokes a parallel with the stylistic phenomenon which we discussed in the previous section: in the same way in which the turgid and crude language of the prisoners is transformed into mesmerizing rhetoric, so the fetters, symbols of dependency and oppression, turn into a garland of flowers. Harcamone is therefore a symbol, a model, an ideal to the narrator and those who share his fascination with great crime. Quite literally, he has inspired reverence in people who almost never felt it. As Longinus observed this in his treatise: "even those little inclined to inspiration become possessed by the greatness of others."<sup>210</sup>

It is quite challenging to say when the second miracle happens. The narrative deliberately confuses any sense of linear time, but it would be safe to assume that Harcamone performs the second miracle several weeks later and also on a Sunday. In order to understand the significance of this second miracle, it is necessary to remind ourselves of a peculiarity of the French penitentiary system. At the time in which capital

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<sup>210</sup> Longinus, *op.cit.*, 22

punishment was still practiced, French prisoners are never informed of the exact day of their execution, but are, rather, seized by surprise and often in the middle of the night. Thus, they spend their last days on Earth in a state of perpetual horror and listening for the steps which would mean that their day has come. As he lies down in his cell at night, the narrator is likewise awaiting this terrifying and glorious event, the taking away of the assassin. Finally, on one such night, he hears sudden thunder and explosion, and sees that Harcamone's cell is illuminated. It is the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the murderer's trial, and the guards have come to take him away in the dead of night in order to execute him. Quite inexplicably, the narrator is able to "follow" them. He climbs up to the floor on which Harcamone's prison cell is. Thus, he is able to co-exist with him on a plane above everyone else. Finding himself next to his idol is tantamount to attaining a position beyond life, death or any purely human concern or constraint. Subsequently, he is able to accompany Harcamone on his last journey. We see in this over-stimulated, over-zealous imagination, triggered by the burgeoning presence of Death, an analogy to the sublime in Kantian terms. The narrator is *Miracle* is in the presence of that "*absolutely great*" thing that is capable of stretching the imagination of the survivor to its limits.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, op.cit., 96. The absolutely great whole, according to Kant, cannot be understood by any synthesis of the imagination guided by the understanding alone. It is a faculty of mind transcending every sensible standard of sense. Paradoxically, imagination is the only human faculty capable of envisaging it.

#### IV.

As the section above has demonstrated, the two narrative universes depicted in *Notre-Dame* and *Miracle* are characterized by an obsessive blasphemy directed at the Catholic tradition. This transgressive discourse is inspired in equal measure by the desire to shock and the need to convince the readers that the human beings depicted in the novel are a caste **apart** from their fellow men. By demonstrating a complete disregard for that which is traditionally deemed sacred, the narrator attempts to disenfranchise himself from the constraints of conventional existence. Thus, the notion of autonomy, of sovereignty becomes the second most important center of the novel. Some passages of the novels suggest a parallel to Drieu La Rochelle as they reveal a similar obsession with an elected people, a group of heroes who exist in and of themselves and are not forced to pay heed to the norms of mainstream behavior. Similarly to Drieu, Genet reveres virility, physical prowess and strength, ruthlessness and disregard for death. Speaking of Divers, one of the most powerful members of Mettray, the narrator would exclaim, “De quelle race plus souveraine était Divers ? » (*MR*, 95).

The privileged status of Genet’s characters is hinted at through literal references to kings and noblemen. In *Miracle de la rose*, the guard writing down Jean Genet’s name upon his arrival, mockingly asks if it’s not Plantagenet. Mockery aside, the question evokes a possible parallel between the criminal and the great king, buried not far from Fontevault. One of Jean’s fellow “colons” in Mettray, Métayer, believes he is a direct descendant of the kings of France. The understanding that being a king is similar to being a criminal is one of the underlying concepts of the narrative. “La légende de Louis XVII

évadé d'une prison donne surtout prétexte à ces rêveries," (MR, 294) the narrator observes, speaking of Métayer. So strong is the latter's faith in his noble origins, that, when tortured by his comrades, he pays no heed to their mockery but, instead, cries out, "On fit aussi cela au Christ!"<sup>212</sup> (NDdF, 296)

Similarly, in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, Louis Culafroy, the future Divine, has been destined for distinction from an early age. A history book he discovers in the attic of the family home proves that his origins are noble. But he hardly needs this concrete proof: he exudes such regal air that even his young classmates are unconsciously aware of his superiority: "Culafroy semblait sécréter un mystère royal." (NDdF, 140) He himself has never doubted his extraordinary status and, like Métayer, takes it one step further and claims that he is one of Christ's own. It turns out that Divine has had a very similar experience. As a youngster in his native village he was fascinated by the church and the church rituals and spent much time in the shadows of the church statues. One day, pushed as though by an invisible hand, he approaches one of them, as though in a trance – "paupières baisées, lourdes et rondes comme des billes" (NDdF, 221) and addresses it, saying, "Seigneur, je suis parmi vos élus."<sup>213</sup> (ibid)

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<sup>212</sup> In 1964, in his *Playboy* interview, Genet would suggest that he himself was not immune to the same fantasy of greatness, of sainthood about himself: "I was an illegitimate child. I was outside the social order. What could I wish for, if not for a special destiny? ... The only thing left for me was to want to be a saint, just that: in other words, a negation of man." (*Playboy*, 54 )

<sup>213</sup> While both books contain autobiographical elements, there is no doubt that *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* "borrows" more from Jean Genet's own childhood. Placed as an infant in a foster home in the region of Morvan, he was raised by a doting family. "La maison d'ardoises", which belongs to his adoptive parents Charles and Eugenie Regnier has been almost fully transported into the novel and becomes the future Divine's home. In their seminal study titled *Jean Genet: essai de chronologie (1910-1944)*, which has been



Divine, the self-proclaimed “élu,” would go on to steal and be relegated to a penal colony for juvenile delinquents. Quite an appropriate dwelling, we might argue, for, as we have already seen, the place was compared to a heavenly abode, physically removed from anything which one may find in regular human experience. Its essence is also quite singular: “Ce qui faisait de la colonie un royaume distinct du royaume des vivants, c’était le changement des symboles et, dans certains cas, des valeurs. Les colons avaient leur dialecte apparenté à celui des prisons, et partant, une morale et une politique particulières.” (*NDdF*, 242)<sup>214</sup> And it is, it seems to me, this “autonomy” of the place, along with the specific set of rules which govern it, further enhances the image of Mettray. Consequently, rather than regret the loss of freedom, those who have been

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instrumental in debunking a great deal of the myths Genet liked to perpetrate about himself, Albert Dichy and Pascal Fouché point out that in 1920, the future writer became an altar boy at the local church. He, too, was mesmerized by church rituals and rejoiced in his role in them. His adoptive mother would share with a friend that she surprised the child conducting Mass in front of an altar he himself had built at the house. She likewise often expressed her hopes that he would become a priest. For more details on this particular aspect of Genet’s childhood, see Dichy, Albert and Pascal Fouché, 30-52).

<sup>214</sup> In 1949, Genet writes a speech to be broadcast on the French radio. Initially accepted, it ended up being rejected, but the manuscript bares testimony to the profound emotion with which the writers speaks of the joys of evil in a children’s prison. He evokes the secret language, the friendships based on audacity, ruse, insolence, laziness and a taste for adventure “against the rules of the Good” [contre les règles du Bien, 22]. He informs us that “what leads [the children] to crime is their adventurous imagination, that is to say the projection of themselves into the most magnificent, the most courageous, the most perilous of lives” (Stewart, 24). He concludes that, to be one of them, “You too had to live that childhood, live that crime, and sanctify it with a magnificent life, that is to say with a courageous breaking with the omnipotence of the world” [il fallait être cette enfance, il fallait, vous aussi, être le crime, et le sanctifier par une vie magnifique, c’est-à-dire par l’audace de rompre avec la toute-puissance du monde, 26]. The entire text of the broadcast can be found in Stewart, *op.cit.*, 20-32

“chosen” to become a part of it, regard it as an enviable and desired location. How can we explain this paradox? There is no denying that most people’s lives are so frustratingly haphazard and subject to so many whims of fate, that one experiences an overwhelming sense of satisfaction at having **being integrated into a rigorous hierarchical system**. Moreover, a system of imprisonment is almost always radically different from anything which resembles the hated ordinary existence **and as such is preferable to it**.

The impressive and reassuring hierarchy in the boy’s colony is maintained through the adherence to a strict hierarchy. Newcomers are subjected to a series of humiliations. The latter are executed without malice, in the most matter-of-fact, utilitarian fashion possible. Their function is to eventually determine the boys’ place in their little society. Upon arrival, for example, the new boys are forced to prostitute themselves, “aller d’hamac en hamac” (*MR*, 189) all the while hoping to find a protector, a superior who would defend them against the cruelty of the others. Gisèle Bickel presents a remarkably thorough analysis of the structure of the little world of the Mettray colony, complete with the special words used to designate every member of this hierarchy.<sup>215</sup> The juvenile delinquents are divided into “families”, presided over by an “older brother.” The latter is one of the eldest colons who has unlimited authority in the eyes of the younger ones:

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<sup>215</sup> The primary opposition in the universe of Mettray is that between the durs, or the hard-core kids, and the faibles, or weak ones. The durs are referred to as marles, caïds, macs, while the faibles are called cloches, clodos, lopes. In addition, the frère aîné, or the “family” chief has a helper, referred to as the voutour, which is the second most enviable position in the hierarchy. For a thorough discussion of the fascinating hierarchy, see Bickel, 69

A la famille B, les règles de l'honneur (cet honneur particulier en honneur là-bas, ou honneur primitif selon les tragiques grecs où le meurtre est d'un conflit la fin la plus morale que l'on puisse proposer), les règles de l'honneur étaient strictement observées, le frère aîné autant aimé que craint, et j'y vu se mordre, se déchirer, sous l'œil impassible des gardiens, les colons qui combattaient pour les raisons de préséance, pour un rang refuse à leur frère aîné." (MR, 129)

Later on, when young Jean becomes the acknowledged lover of his own *frère aîné*, he is overwhelmed with a realization of his own importance: "Je devenais le centre, la clé de voûte d'un système familial sévère" (MR, 163). Here, as in the ritual of prostitution, we catch a glimpse of the intimate link existing between sovereignty and sexuality and which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

It is significant that a similar hierarchy is widely recognized and remains a constant throughout a criminal's life. The juvenile delinquents, referred to as *durs*, usually end up as *maquereaux* – men who sustain themselves through prostitution (theirs or that of others), or thieves - casseurs or cambrioleurs. The former *faibles* keep on living in perpetual awe and respect of those grown-up *durs*, serving them and taking on the brunt of their anger and dissatisfaction. The adult narrator respects and sticks to the established hierarchy. Having recognized a former Mettray comrade at Fontevrault, he nonetheless is hesitant to be the first one to approach him and remind them of their acquaintance: "... je ne voulais pas avoir l'air de les rechercher en fréquentant trop ostensiblement un des leurs que je n'avais pas le droit de considérer autrement qu'eux mêmes." (MR, 62) It is significant that, if Genet insists upon the strict hierarchy reigning in the correctional institutions, as well as the criminal world in general, he rarely refers to interdictions imposed by non-members of these societies, and least of all, by the

individuals who are supposed to supervise and control the “criminals.” I believe that this deliberate insouciance and disregard for outside structure further emphasizes the particularity of the Genetian universe. At the same time, it is confusingly similar to the world of ordinary, non-criminal people. Writes Elizabeth Bickel: “Et, en effet, le monde de la criminalité génétienne n’est pas le reflet inversé de l’autre monde. Genet ne construit pas un autre monde qui se contente de nier le notre, *il nie tout*, il nie son propre monde, sa propre société, voulant tout détruire, se voulant négation pure.”<sup>216</sup>

The universe outside the prison walls Genet introduces us to is likewise characterized by a strict hierarchy. Divine, portrayed as a clearly superior creature ever since childhood, is logically the queen of the Montmartre transsexual and homosexual scene.<sup>217</sup> Even in this particular milieu, situated on the fringes of mainstream humanity, she would be distinguished by the dignity of her behavior. Her privileged status permits her to act as she pleases. One of the most memorable scenes of the novel, which fascinated even Jean-Paul Sartre depicts Divine, faux-pearl crown on her head, presiding over a rowdy crowd at the “tantes” and their men’s favorite hang out spot. The joint

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<sup>216</sup> Bickel, 21

<sup>217</sup> The fact that we know more about Divine than virtually any one of the other characters in the two novels confirms her position of superiority. In fact, the whole narrative of *Notre-Dame* can be related through her experiences alone. We meet her whenever she is still an impressionable countryside youth by the name of Louis Culafroy. Through flashbacks, we follow her as she loses her faith and her virginity. (It is by no means a coincidence that the two occur in quick succession). Later, in Paris, Louis reinvents himself and becomes the transgendered prostitute Divine. She settles down with Mignon-les-Petits-Pieds, a thief and a pimp. In time, this extraordinary creature also shelters *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* who goes on to steal her black lover, Sek Gorgui. Mignon and Notre-Dame are caught by the police and confess to murder. Notre-Dame is executed, which devastates Divine. Subsequently, she ages, passes through sexual torments and finally dies of tuberculosis.

bears, appropriately, the name of *The Tabernacle*. Amidst the brouhaha, she lets the crown drop. It breaks, scattering little pearls all over the floor. The symbolic loss of the crown and of authority is ridiculed by the rest of the “ladies” who, we understand, are jealous of the prominent position Divine occupies in their midst. Unstirred as befits a real queen, however, Divine immediately regains control over the situation:

Alors, Divine pousse un rire en cascade stridente. Toute le monde est attentif: c'est son signal. De sa bouche ouverte, elle arrache son dentier, le pose sur son crane et, le cœur dans la gorge mais victorieuse, elle s'écrie d'une voix changée, et les lèvres rentrées dans la bouche: Eh bien, merde, Mesdames, je serai reine quand même” (*NDdF*, 213).

The type of behavior, exemplified by Divine at the Tabernacle is held as the golden standard of independence and sovereignty in Genet's writing. The novels suggest that the truly free individual has no constraints. He exudes, naturally, a sense of his own undisputed merits. Consequently, the rest of the world must undoubtedly recognize these merits. What sets Divine apart from her fellow human beings is a triumph over the circumstances. It can only be achieved, Genet seems to suggest, if the limits of one's humanity are pushed to their absolute extreme.

The grotesque and glorious scene of Divine and her crown is one example. The narrator of *Miracle de la rose* has a similar experience as he breaks into and robs his first apartment. He has spent days preparing himself for the great day. He has slept by his tools as the warrior would by his arms. He describes them in such endearing terms that we understand that he cherishes and reveres them as magical tools, providing access to an

unknown universe. In the forceful and unlawful act of penetrating into someone else's property, the burglar seem to affirms himself as God and sovereign.

After he hears the delicious *click* of the lock, the narrator holds his breath and opens the door. Looking back, he admits that at the time, he was having an almost out-of-body experience. He sees himself as “le jeune souverain qui prend possession d'un royaume nouveau, où tout est neuf pour lui” (*MR*, 40). Once he perceives the rich loot which the rooms reveal, and fills his pockets with the bills he has discovered, his chest starts swelling with a sense of pride and power he has not known before. Once again, it stems from his conviction that he has committed an act which sets him apart from his fellow men. With the newly discovered riches, “J'étais sauvé du servage et des basses dispositions, car je venais d'accomplir un acte d'audace physique.” (*NDdF*, 41)<sup>218</sup>

This dependence on crime for the purposes of affirming one's superiority is among the most significant reasons Georges Bataille provides for describing Genet's oeuvre as failure. He saw the thief's sovereignty as a superficial type of independence, “souveraineté dérisoire”, primarily concerned with perfunctory representations of opulence and luxury, i.e., jewelry, money, etc. Bataille claims that Genet confuses the **external signs of** sovereignty with the very essence of the concept. *La Littérature et le mal* concludes that Genet never really attains this sovereignty. What's more, Bataille sees the perpetual quest for evil which Genet's characters are engaged in, ultimately ending at

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<sup>218</sup> The reader finds a very similar scene in *Notre-Dame*, one which likewise details the eponymous protagonist's first robbery. We are immediately instructed that this particular sense of elevation, of control over a situation lifts the burglar to the rank of God himself, since he transgresses an order which has clearly been prescribed in the Ten Commandments (“Thou shalt not steal”).

an impasse, “l’impasse d’une transgression illimitée”<sup>219</sup>, for evil ceases to be evil in a world in which no good exists. Thus, Genet’s protagonists end up, in Bataille’s opinion, estranged, and devoid of any impetus to act. Yet, it seems to me that theft is central to all of Genet’s fiction not only because of the biographical meaning it has for him (he was, after all, a thief),<sup>220</sup> but also because it is, par excellence, the greatest offense against bourgeois sensibility. It symbolizes an undermining of authority, hierarchy and power relationships based on ownership possible. As we know, being attached to and looking

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<sup>219</sup> Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 136

<sup>220</sup> Even though he was extremely proud of his past as a criminal, it is important to note that Genet’s crimes in and of themselves were not all that impressive. Theft, forgery and homosexuality, his only offenses, were considered but examples of misdemeanor at the time. Just as he manipulated the time and space of his own early life (expanding the year of his crossings of Europe, contracting his years of military life), he would also reinvent his crimes, both in his novels written in prison and in his later interviews. All of Genet’s imprisonments came from momentary acts of petty theft (handkerchiefs from *La Samaritaine*, forging, bibelots, breaking into cars), rather than from the intensely pursued life of burglary, with the intimations of violence and murder, that his novels evoked. What’s more, as a thief, Genet was remarkably maladroit and indeed far from the glorious and skillful criminals whose merits he extols in his fiction. Jean-Jacques Kihm, Cocteau’s biographer, credits the great writer with encouraging Genet to write. He dismisses his “career” as a thief altogether in one phrase: « Cesse de voler, lui dit [Cocteau]. Tu es un mauvais voleur, tu te fais prendre. Mais tu es un bon écrivain’. (Episode quoted in Kihm, 275-6). It is Genet’s attitude towards crime in general that is singular and of interest to the present study. Critics Stewart and McGregor write that “it was always Genet’s attitude that theft, forgery and homosexuality constitute good rather than evil, an attitude which shocks bourgeois moralists” (In Stewart / McGregor, 127). In one of his trials, Genet was subjected to a psychological examination, which had to determine whether he could be held responsible for his transgressions. Dr Claude, the court-appointed examiner, stated that his conversations with the future writer revealed an individual « [qui] exalte les qualités de ceux qui cherchent des expressions nouvelles à la description des faits que la vie apporte tous les jours. » (Claude, 7) The eleven pages of Dr Claude’s testimonial are among the most fascinating studies on Genet.

after material possessions is the most ostensible characteristic of conventional middle-class consciousness. Aware of the symbolic meaning of stealing, Genet's thieves "perform" in accordance to the strictest set of rules possible. Here's one account:

Mes cambriolages, je les accomplis toujours seul ... et, durant cette succession, sans cesse davantage je me purifiais. Je faisais mes cases selon les rites que j'apprenais par des conversations avec les homes. Je respectais les superstitions, je faisais preuve d'une merveilleuse sentimentalité ... et j'aurais craint, comme eux attirer sur moi les foudres du ciel en vidant dans mes vagues la tirelire des gosses" (*MR*, 220).

The feeling of happiness and the surging sense supernatural autonomy which accompanies acts of theft in Genet's novels is that much more powerful when the crime involves a sacrificing of a human life. These instances reinforce the intimate link existing between sanctity and crime, as their descriptions are carried out in similar vocabulary. As an example, let us turn to one of Jean's inmates. He has killed his lover and subsequently decided to hide the traces by "burying" her corpse inside a concrete bench which he himself builds in their apartment. It turns out that the job has taken a whole day, in the course of which,

L'irréparable accompli, il s'y résignait et s'en accommodait, puis il s'attaquait au réparable. Comme d'un manteau, il se débarrassa de son âme chrétienne. Il sanctifia ses actes d'une grâce, qui ne devait rien à un Dieu qui condamne le meurtre ... Pendant une journée entière, comme automatiquement, son corps fut à la merci d'ordres qui ne venaient pas d'ici-bas" (*NDdF*, 188)



In the course of committing the crime and dissimulating it, that person stops being a part of mainstream humanity. He is stripped of his Christian soul, which here symbolizes his aspect as a “normal” human being. Simultaneously, however, he ascends to a position in which he no longer needs to answer to his fellow man, but is instead overcome by the sense of his own autonomy. Answering to “orders” whose origins cannot be identified, he has claimed the position of the sovereign.

Genet’s narratives are characterized by an overt lack of sympathy for the victims, an absence of remorse and a desire to elevate crime to the rank of a religious experience. These are the real reasons why his characters can only truly exist isolated from everyone else. Thus, it is not surprising that for all those existing at the fringes of mainstream society - the most beautiful, the most cruel, the authors of the most unscrupulous acts, prison constitutes a home. They accept and revel in the way of life behind bars: “Quand il m’assura aimer la prison (Il me le dit un matin, à la promenade, en me montrant son visage sans fatigue), je compris qu’il existait des gens pour qui la prison est une forme de vie acceptée,” (MR, 343) Genet would remark, speaking about one of his own inmates. At the same time, since one is jailed following a process of formal incrimination, once the procedure is finished, one finds oneself **beyond** judgment. Among one’s fellow prisoners, one finally belongs to a group. This is the reason why Jean misses the colony at Mettray. there, he had had the sense of being one among equals: “[T]ous les colons reconnaissaient que j’avais le droit d’être celui que j’étais.” (MR, 97) In the memory of those who knew him, Genet remained an independent and arresting individual, a man who did not feel the need to conform to the expectations of society. The French director Nico Papatakis, who collaborated with Genet on *Un chant d’amour*, remembers that

meeting the author for the first time in 1944 was an extremely empowering experience:  
“Il fut pour moi l'exemple de ce qu'un homme dans l'exclusion et le désarroi peut faire...  
Grâce à lui, plus tard, je pris conscience qu'il fallait assumer son exclusion et en faire si  
possible une tentative du cri ou de chant et cessais de vouloir m'intégrer comme un  
forcené dans une certaine société. »<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> *Theatres au Cinéma*, 113

## V.

Despite the offensive attitude towards Christianity and the condoning of crime, to some, the explicit references to homosexual love and intercourse constitute the most controversial aspect of the two novels. This is significant in itself, for, on the level of expression, the passages dealing with sexuality are among the most elegant and poetic fragments of the novel. Once again, a glance into the ways in which Proust influenced Genet provides a convenient point of departure. The unquestionable parallel between images of vegetation and the implications of sexuality, was important to both writers. In his long and eloquent analysis critic Alain Buisine writes,

Exactement comme chez Proust où la botanique est à l'intersection même de la religion et la sexualité, tout est question de fleurs, fleurs de la sainteté et fleurs du mal, chez le bien nommé Genet. Depuis les épines roses, du côté de Meséglise, de certaines aubépines moins virginales que d'autres jusqu'aux enroulements des clématites, des liserons, des capucines autour des colonnes phalliques, depuis les catleyas accrochés au corsage d'Odette, d'entre les larges pétales mauves desquels sort pour Swann la possession de sa maîtresse jusqu'aux fleurs passés aux boutonnières de la braguette de Mignon, depuis les bouquets de rougissants boutons des pommiers jusqu'à Mimosa I, Mimosa II et Mimosa mi-IV, qui font bouquet avec leurs parapluies et qui, au passage de Mignon, impriment un mouvement de vrille à leur corps comme pour l'élancer, depuis le baron de Charlus prenant devant Juien ses poses « avec la coquetterie qu'aurait ou avoir l'orchidée pour le bourdon providentiellement survenu » jusqu'aux « grands macs inflexibles, stricts, sexes

épanouis dont je ne sais plus s'ils ont des lis ou si les sexes ne sont pas totalement eux », on n'en finirait pas d'établir en chassé-croisé l'anthologie botanique de la sexualité.<sup>222</sup>

The insistence on physical perfection leads us to believe that, to Genet, homosexuality is yet another proof of his characters superiority vis-à-vis the rest of humanity. Once again, a parallel with Ancient Greece imposes itself. We remember that sexual intercourse between two men was considered a superior form of copulation, which quenched not just vulgar lust, but also responded to a deeper need for camaraderie and understanding between men. What's more, in the sexual act between a teacher and his disciple, knowledge and wisdom were transmitted.<sup>223</sup>

In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, the walls of the narrator's prison cell are plastered with pictures of the faces of famous criminals he has cut out from newspapers. They have been chosen because of the double fascination they hold for the narrator. On the one hand, they are all criminals. On the other, they appear beautiful and sexually appealing. Let us qualify the latter category. Every once in a while, the narrator concedes, a perfectly innocent stranger, an actor or a sports player, would also find his place in this gallery. Yet, as Jean points out, if he has been chosen, it is because he implicitly belongs

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<sup>222</sup> Buisine, 44-45

<sup>223</sup> Without going into any detail into a considerable body of work which deals with this issue, and which I am not prepared to discuss, suffice it to say that books such as *Before Sexuality*, the volume edited by Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin (op. cit.) essentially draw on the work of Michel Foucault and argue that homosexuality and homophobia in the modern sense were unknown to the ancient Greeks. The latter formulated discriminations on the basis of roles and practices, rather than with reference to the objects of sexual desire.

with everybody else: “Mais si je l’ai cloué à mon mur, c’est qu’il avait selon moi, au coin de la bouche ou à l’angle des paupières, le signe sacré des monstres” (*NDdF*, 14). Thus, from the outset, monstrosity is cited as the necessary ingredient for beauty and sexual arousal.

Furthermore, the ecstasy and devotion evoked in those who lust after “the monsters” borders on religious infatuation. Thus, in the constant fluidity of the descriptions, the sacred and the profane are permanently intertwined. When young Louis Culafroy awaits his “miracle” in the small village church, the curtains of the *tabernacle* make him think of the unbuttoned fly of a pair of pants: “Les doubles rideaux du tabernacle étant mal joints, ménageant une fente aussi obscène qu’une braguette déboutonnée” (*NDdF*, 183). Inversely, the everyday is elevated to the rank of the spiritual. Divine, enamored by Mignon, would exclaim that he is the incarnation of the holy spirit and add that she adores him to such a point that she is inspired to say mass in his presence: “Quand je le vois couché à poil, j’ai envie de dire la messe sur sa poitrine” (*NDdF*, 56). This confluence of imagery hardly surprises us. As we already know from the writings of Bataille and Foucault,<sup>224</sup> it is virtually impossible to discuss sexuality independently of its rapport to both the sacrilegious and the sovereignty aspects of the two novels. In *L’Erotisme*, Bataille insists that the two moments of the *dual operation* of eroticism are so intimately bound up with one another as to be all but indistinguishable.<sup>225</sup> The terms “interdiction” and “transgression” become meaningful only subjectively, that is, as affective experiences of attraction and repulsion, which

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<sup>224</sup> Georges Bataille’s *L’Erotisme* and Foucault’s 1963 essay, “Préface à la transgression”, clearly spell out the relationship

<sup>225</sup> *L’Erotisme*, op.cit., 35-39

distinguish the two realms of the sacred and the profane. Bataille presents this as a dance, a *ronde*, a sequence of seduction that moves us toward the sacred object, followed by a feeling of horror that repels us from it.

The acts of tenderness between the inmates are delicate and gentle moments. They alleviate the suffering of incarceration and are cherished and remembered, as well as masturbated to, for days on end. Those instances will be proclaimed sacred. Jean, the narrator, describes the first time he sets eyes on his love interest, Bulkaen. It happens a week after his arrival at the colony. The young man has an enormous tattoo of a blue eagle on his back. It is so fresh, it has not healed completely and the delicate blood clots from the needle work are still very much visible. Observing the chiseled body of the young man, the narrator is seized with fear: “Ce fut quelque chose comme l’effroi sacré qui me saisit.” (*MR*, 27) Later, in an episode in which the two men reveal their feelings for one another, their interaction would once again be elevated to the order of church ritual. Carried out in the obligatory rough argot of prisoners, it hides volumes of meaning behind feigned disinterest and roughness: “Si j’ai le béguin pour toi, ne t’en occupe pas”, Jean would offer. Bulkaen would answer, to the narrator’s utmost delight, “Si, Jean, je m’en occupe. Ca me regarde”. Jean’s joy is such that he exclaims, ecstatically, “Je tremblais. La messe pouvait finir, les orgues se taire.” (*MR*, 85)

Once again, the narrative would constantly oscillate between the sacrilegious dimension of homosexual copulation and the natural tenderness of the act. For Divine, for example, the intercourse is innocent. She considers it a part of the normal order of things “Disons déjà que ses amours ne lui avaient fait redouter la colère de Dieu, le mépris de Jésus ou le dégoût praliné de la Sainte Vierge ... Divine fit de ses amours un Dieu au-

dessus de Dieu, de Jésus et de la Sainte Vierge” (*NDdF*, 142). She has no qualms about sharing her pain or her ecstasy with God. Neglected by her lover, it is with Him that she communicates, and it is his divine presence which saves her from despair: « [S]eule au grenier, elle offre à Dieu son amour et sa peine. Car Dieu – les Jésuites l’ont dit – choisit mille manières d’entrer dans les âmes. » (*NDdF*, 101) Thus, Genet seems to suggest that judging Divine is an activity which belongs to the human and not to the religious order.

Young Jean’s partner at the colony, a boy close to the narrator’s own age at the time, Villeroy, symbolizes this indulgence towards homosexuality which Genet attributes to God. Villeroy wears a religious medallion around his neck:

Autour de son cou, il portait une chaînette de métal ou était accrochée une médaille d’argent du Sacre-Cœur de Jésus. Quand nous faisons l’amour, quand il était las d’embrasser mes yeux, ma bouche e traînait sur son cou, sur sa poitrine ... Quand j’arrivais à hauteur de sa gorge il se tournait un peu, et cette médaille qui pendait à la chaînette, il la laissait tomber dans ma bouche ouverte. (*MR*, 190-91)

Thus, Christ literally becomes a part of the two youngsters’ lovemaking. Similarly, whenever Jean dreams of escape and sharing a happy life “forever after” with a willing partner, he deliberately inscribes the reveries within a readily identifiable Christian context. One of the most frequently recurring symbols of *Miracle de la Rose* is that of the ship, *la galère*, which (other than suggesting an immediate parallel with Rimbaud’s drunken boat), stands for escape, discovery, breaking away from reality, penetration of an inner world. It is significant that in this fantasy, there always seems to be a union, established with a mythical captain, a strong male who embodies the fantasy of a sexual

partner.<sup>226</sup> In one of the most significant *galère* dreams recounted in *Miracle*, the narrator dreams that he is on the ship again, climbing the (cross-shaped) mast. He slips and falls in the open arms of the captain. Such a dream, in brief, is carried out in the vocabulary of a veritable *imitatio Christi*. It illustrates the close correspondence between the sexual and the religious. The (sexual) power of the captain is so overwhelming that it is impossible for a human to bear. Therefore, the narrator must surrender to it and become literally enveloped in it.

There is no doubt that for Genet, religious worship and the sexual act are often intertwined. Moreover, he insists that it is through the sexual act that one reaches divinity. This realization is by no means a novel one – one has to go no further than Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to see how closely the sexual act is a part of religion. Copulation – real or pretended – is often a part of religious ceremony, and sexual climax is not unlike religious ecstasy. Carl Jung, talking about Saint Augustine, fleshes out the parallel: “Like a bridegroom Christ went forth from his chamber, he went out with a presage of his nuptials into a field of the world. He came to the marriage-bed of the cross, and there, in mounting it, he consummated his marriage. And when he perceived the sighs of the creature, lovingly gave himself up in place of his bride, and he joined himself to the woman (matrona) forever.”<sup>227</sup> Deviant behavior – in sexual as well as criminal practice, is likewise a powerful aphrodisiac. In *Sade*, we observe the intimate connection which binds the two: the greater the infamy, the more powerful the orgasm. It is without a doubt also the very essence of incarceration in which young Jean and his

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<sup>226</sup> Bettina Knapp, one of the first critics to consider Genet's novels, underlines the importance of the rocking movements of the ship, closely reminiscent of sexual intercourse. Knapp, 41-2

<sup>227</sup> Jung, 433



fellow prisoners find themselves which enables him to transform the institution of imprisonment into a locus of sexual fantasy. Steven Barber observes that,

[Genet] was being incarcerated in a penal system whose grandiose intentions of the previous century had entirely evanesced, so that [he] passed through the ghosts and broken fragments of prisons rather than being held in stasis by their once-monumental forms; that dereliction of Mettray enabled Genet to overlay it with his volatile preoccupations and sexually to recreate it in his novels and film projects.”<sup>228</sup>

In conclusion, no analysis of the intricate rites of seduction in Genet would be complete unless we mention the importance of the gift for this process. Much like the strict hierarchy which governs the interactions between the juvenile delinquents and, later on, the prisoners, the rites of seduction among the inmates are elaborate rituals. Each gesture carries a symbolic meaning discernible only for those used to the peculiarities of prison life. The display of affection often starts with the offering of a gift. The latter is something which might seem banal in life *outside* the walls of the jail, but which is precious inside them. I cannot help but think that Genet is subverting at least two decades of high-brow anthropological discourse through the description of the commodity exchange occurring between the inmates:<sup>229</sup> Consider, for example this passage, in which

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<sup>228</sup> Barber, 22

<sup>229</sup> At the turn of the Twentieth century, exchange came to be viewed as a key aspect of life. The work of anthropologist B. Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands and Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1924) demonstrated that gift-bearing and receiving constitutes modes of exchange in which people, objects, and social relations form a whole. The permutations of these modes are endless, as are the incentives and motives behind the exchange.

Jean, enamored by Bulkaen, is overjoyed to offer him a handful of cigarette butts. Yet he manages to conceal his emotions as he does so:

Sans laisser paraître un sentiment sur mon visage bien que je fusse dépité, je mis simplement ma main dans la poche ... et la retirai pleine de mégots que je lui rendis. Il ne parut pas croire que tout cela fut pour lui, mais sa figure rayonna. Et je descendis, toujours sans un mot, en haussant, d'un mouvement désinvolte, les épaules." (*MR*, 64)

Insignificant as these proceedings may appear to the reader, they are full of significance for the two men involved. Bulkaen follows Jean into the courtyard, and thence begins their romance. This, exchange and desire are inextricably bound in the life of the prisoners, much like they essentially are in real life.

## VI.

Genet's beautiful criminals commit acts which deliberately offend established societal order. They are embodiments of transgression, but this is not the main reason why we find them compelling. I would like to argue that Genet's main achievement as an artist lies in the way in which he points out to deficiencies of existence **within ourselves, within "normal human beings" and not outside of them.** We have already established that, even though they were **based** on real people, Genet's protagonists were never **meant** to be read exclusively as such. Similarly, the occurrences in their lives are not meant to be interpreted on the literal level. The vigilant reader has not forgotten that the greatest miracles which occur in Genet's universe happen to ordinary people and are thus of a terrestrial and not a celestial order. Consider Divine's miraculous experience, for example. Before she became the self-confident, extravagant creature that she is, she had an revelatory experience at church. It shocked her so profoundly that she never truly got over it. Like so many other youngsters, she (still a he, Louis, at the time) is fascinated by the church ornaments and statues. In other words, she is impressed by the concrete outward symbols of religion. Obeying an inexplicable impulse, one day, he seizes three crucifixes and throws them to the ground. As he commits this sacrilegious act, he naturally expects all hell to break loose. The implications of his deed is exhilarating and petrifying at the same time. He has no doubt that the imminent punishment will be unleashed upon him. Nothing of the kind happens. The miracle, in fact, is that there are no miracles: "Et le miracle eut lieu. Il n'y eut pas de miracle. Dieu s'était dégonflé. Dieu était creux. Seulement un trou avec n'importe quoi autour. Une forme jolie, comme la

tête en plâtre de Marie-Antoinette, comme les petits soldats, qui étaient des trous avec un eu de plomb mince autour. » (*NDdF*, 184)

The scene quotes above contains one of the most important keys to Genet's novels. Miracles do not exist. Transgression will go unpunished. And anyway, both of these are simply words. Uncomfortable as it may seem to interpret Jean Genet's oeuvre from the point of view of **morality** and not immorality, I believe that the true drive behind Genet's highly controversial writing is his desire to demonstrate the arbitrariness of moral categories.<sup>230</sup> Just how, in Genet's terms, does one define suspicious morality? He would tell you the answer himself: "Either you are a judge or you are a prisoner – I don't like judges who lean lovingly toward their prisoners."<sup>231</sup> Hence, we can conclude that the true objective is establishing the grounds on which the two can be distinguished.

Genet acknowledged that the criminal, the reject, the deviant, in short, those who eventually become prisoners, on the one hand; and the judge, the moralist, the prosecutor, the an individual who strives to impose normative behavior and ensure abiding by its rules, on the other, live in a state of constant antagonism. What he did not believe in, however, was that one could belong to just one of either sides. He believed this

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<sup>230</sup> Genet's attempts to be a "moralist" have been acknowledged only by a handful of his contemporaries. Cocteau, who invariably believed in his potential as a great artist, recognizes as early as 1957, "qu'il faudra un jour [le] considérer comme un moraliste, si paradoxale que cela paraisse, car on a coutume de confondre le moraliste et l'homme qui nous fait la morale, me disait, il y a quelques semaines, cette parole poignée « Ce n'est pas assez de regarder vivre mes héros et de les plaindre. Nous devons prendre leurs péchés sur nous et en subir les conséquences. » (Jean Cocteau, *La Difficulté d'être*, 279) Cocteau also remembers Genet's refusal to be introduced to no other than André Gide, because the latter's "immorality" appeared "dubious".

<sup>231</sup> Cocteau, *Professional Secrets*, 279

Manichean opposition to be artificial and inadequate in explaining the true nature of social order. Writes Gisèle Bickel, “Et, en effet, le monde de la criminalité génétique n’est pas le reflet inversé de l’autre monde. Genet ne construit pas un autre monde qui se contente de nier le notre, *il nie tout*, il nie son propre monde, sa propre société, voulant tout détruire, se voulant négation pure.”<sup>232</sup> If he insisted upon the need for complete annihilation of this paradigm, it is because Genet believed that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way people think and perceive reality. If he extols treachery and cowardice, he does so because he sees them as forces that are capable of fracturing a system he detested. In *L’Ennemi déclaré*, a passionate and eloquent semi-autobiography, Genet would write,

J’ai su très jeune que je n’étais pas français, que je n’appartenais pas au village. Je l’ai su d’une façon bête, niaise, comme ça: le maître d’école avait demandé d’écrire une petite rédaction, chaque élève devait décrire sa maison ... Il s’est trouvé que ma description était, selon le maître d’école, la plus jolie. Il l’a lue à haute voix et toute le monde s’est moqué de moi en disant: “Mais c’est pas sa maison, c’est un enfant trouvé”, et alors il y eut un tel vide, un tel abaissement ... Oh! Le mot n’est pas trop fort, haïr la France, c’est rien, il faudrait plus que haïr, plus que vomir la France.”<sup>233</sup>

Post – *Saint Genet*, one is wary of reading too much into such heartfelt confessions. If he “hated” France, Genet did so because, much like Drieu La Rochelle, he believed that the nation was corrupt, stagnant and in need of a radical change and rejuvenation. Thus, his hatred was not of the stubborn, irrational, childish kind. It was a “discriminating” kind of

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<sup>232</sup> Bickel, 69

<sup>233</sup> Excerpt quoted in *Magazine littéraire*, 16

hatred for the flawed aspects of existence. Steven Barber points out that the writer was “delighted both by the abject cowardice he perceived in the population (in military forces) in headlong flight, and by the abrupt cancellation of the judicial, penal and linguistic systems which had condemned him.”<sup>234</sup> Still, it is significant that, for all the problematic condoning of all sorts of deviant behavior, Genet never embraces the Fascist doctrine.<sup>235</sup> As Pascale Gaitet aptly observes, “The appeal fascism held for Genet can be traced to three distinct factors: his emotional rejection of France, his attraction to a certain masculinity that coincides with a fascist aesthetic, and a psychic process, here related to mourning rituals, that transforms passive victims into active agents.”<sup>236</sup> This statement is corroborated by Genet’s biography: he felt extremely ill at ease in Germany and around all things German. In *Journal du voleur*, he would tell us why. In the course of the travels, in whom we recognize the young Jean of the vagabond years, finds himself in Germany and quickly understands that this is a “nation of thieves.” In their midst, he, a thief, is merely one of many. The experience is uncomfortable and suggests that the narrator feels as though he has been robbed of his very sense of self. In one of the most widely quoted passages in Genet criticism, he points out that, “C’est un peuple de voleurs, sentais-je en moi-même. Si je vole ici je n’accomplis aucune action singulière et

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<sup>234</sup> Barber, 35. The author also suggests that what he perceived as the comical theatricality of the French at the time of the fall of Paris and the Occupation which followed it likewise filled him with no small amount of morbid delectation.

<sup>235</sup> However, we have to mention here the hilarious masturbatory fantasy of having sex with the Fuhrer, detailed in his fourth novel, *Funeral Rites* (*Pompes funèbres*, 1953). In her essay “Fascinating Fascism”, Susan Sontag writes: “It was Genet, [...] who provided one of the first texts that showed the erotic allure fascism exercised on someone who is not a fascist” (Sontag, 103).

<sup>236</sup> Gaitet, 77

qui puisse me réaliser mieux : j'obéis à l'ordre habituel, je ne détruis pas. Je ne commets pas le mal, je ne dérange rien. Le scandale est impossible. Je vole à vide » (*Journal du voleur*, 131). The double standard in stealing these lines reveal is very telling. We see spelled out here a general attitude which characterizes the ensemble of Genet's literary work : that one should always act **in accordance with the context** rather than follow a one-fits-all pre-programmed moral behavior.

But let us go back to the gallery of criminals we have encountered in *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*. Their position is enviable. They have broken loose from the constraints of the quotidian. Genet argues that, subconsciously, those enmeshed in an ordinary and contingent life strive towards attaining a similar position. Everyone wants to be an extraordinary person and achieve something never done before. Crime provides us with such an opportunity, and everyone secretly wants in on it. To quote but one example, once Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs' murders have been discovered, the news of them spread quickly. His actions are elevated to the rank of a miracle, and everyone talks about them:

Le cure d'un village, entendant autour de lui flotter le nom de Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs, sans en avoir reçu de mandement du diocèse, un dimanche en chaire, ordonna des prières et recommanda ce nouveau culte à la dévotion particulière des fidèles. Les fidèles, dans leur bancs, saisis, ne dirent pas un mot, ne pensèrent pas une pensée. Dans un hameau, le nom de la fleur que l'on appelle « reines-des-prés » fit demander par une petite fille, qui songeait à Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs :

- Dis, maman, c'est un miraculée ?

Il y eut d'autres miracles, que je n'ai pas le temps de rapporter. (*NDdF*, 318-9)

Similarly, whenever the criminals are sentenced, the whole process is depicted as an extraordinary occurrence. The judicial aspects of the proceedings is pushed to the background. The real focus is placed on the sentencing and the condemnation. The room the witnesses are convened to is called “Cour des miracles” (NDdF, 344). The criminal has, naturally, expected all the pomp and the display which accompanies the church service – “Or, Notre-Dame, dans sa prison ayant entendu parler des fastes de la cour, s’imaginait qu’aujourd’hui, par une sorte d’erreur grandiose, elle entrait par la grande porte du public, ouverte à deux battants, tout comme, le jour des Rameaux, le clergé, qui d’habitude sort de la sacristie par une porte pratiquée sur l’un des cotés du chœur, surprend les fidèles en apparaissant dans leur dos” (NDdF, 329). The near-fusion between the institutions of the church and those of justice underscores the futility of both.

Genet goes to great lengths to convince his reader that Notre-Dame’s trial is not a private affair. He presents it not simply the judging of an individual, but a situation in which everyone participates: “C’était la religion de l’heure, d’attendre et d’envier un jeune assassin” (NDdF, 323). And his interaction with the people who are attending the hearing is that of a divinity among men . Much like Harcamone in *Miracle de la rose*, Notre-Dame is also going to die. Therefore, he is no longer bound by the constraints of conventional behavior. His status is so appealing to the onlookers, that they intuitively strive towards him: “Cette simple scène nous transporte, c’est à dire qu’elle souleva l’instant comme l’anéantissement au monde soulève le fakir et le tient en suspens. L’instant n’était plus de la terre mais du ciel” (NDdF, 324). And once the sentence is pronounced, the instant is compared to an apotheosis (NDdF, 353). The judge has to restrain himself not to canonize the murderer: “Il sentait qu’un mot de lui, un geste trop



quotidien le transformeraient en avocat du diable et justifieraient la canonisation de l'assassin" (*NDdF*, 330).

We have had to await the very end of the novel in order to understand the grander design behind the work of art. Notre-Dame the criminal becomes the individual who has been called to atone for the sins and transgressions **of those who appear to abide by the law:**

[Q]uand il fut remis entre les mains des gardiens, [il] leur parut revêtu d'un caractère sacré, voisin de celui qu'avaient autrefois les victimes expiatoires, qu'elles fussent bouc, bœuf, enfant, et qu'ont encore aujourd'hui les rois et les Juifs. Les gardiens lui parlèrent et le servirent, comme si, le sachant chargé du poids des péchés du monde, ils eussent voulu attirer sur eux la bénédiction du Rédempteur" (*NDdF*, 353).

The condemnation of the criminal becomes a kind of ritual cleansing, a purification, an exorcism which is necessary in order to atone for the sins and the transgressions of the general population. It is a practice we remember well from Greek mythology as well as from a variety of anthropological studies. It is always those who are in some ways **outside** mainstream humanity, be it because of extreme superiority or extreme inferiority, that society designates as victims. Their ritual demise and eradication is deemed essential to the cleansing of the society. And it is no surprise that it is precisely someone like Genet who is in a position to alert us to such a possibility, for he is an individual very much at odds with the system in which he finds himself. Let us conclude this study by quoting Philippe Sollers' poetic insight into the essence of the writer as symbolized by his name: On entend immédiatement *ange* dans Jean Genet », but even more importantly, one experiences the link between, on the one hand, negation (je n'ai, je n'est), and birth

of something new- naissance de l'autre (je nais)."<sup>237</sup> It is the joy of the virtuoso balancing act between negation and rebirth which Genet has left behind for all of us to feel.

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<sup>237</sup> Sollers, « Physique de Genet : Mimi-ques, postures, gestes et rythmes : étude physique de l'auteur et de ses personnages ». In *Magazine Littéraire*, 40

## “States of being where art is the norm”

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*

I.

For centuries, interpretation of literature has given us the choice between two types of analysis. Artworks have been viewed as either serving an instructive purpose through a combination of pleasing and teaching,<sup>238</sup> or, in contrast, as providing us with an alternative to utilitarian moral values and an existence viewed as mediocre and devoid of meaning.<sup>239</sup> Unsurprisingly, a text such Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* which does not lend

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<sup>238</sup>Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, which appears around 18 BC, is one of the first texts attempting to define the purpose of poetry. Horace depicts it as a complex relationship between pleasing and teaching. Verses 333-365 provide a particularly good illustration. For the sake of brevity, we will quote here just the beginning of the passage:

Poets wish to benefit or to please, or to speak  
What is both enjoyable and helpful to living.  
When you give instruction, be brief, what’s quickly  
Said the spirit grasps easily, faithfully retains:  
Everything superfluous flows out of a full mind.  
Fictions meant to amuse should be close to reality,  
So your play shouldn’t ask for belief in whatever  
It chooses: no living child from the Lamia’s full belly!

Translated by A.S. Kline.

<sup>239</sup> It was Clement Greenberg, the champion of modernist criticism, who epitomized the sentiment that moral considerations are not only distinct from but also incompatible with real art, in remarking that “I have never felt that morality should in any sense be affected by the aesthetic factor. That’s an absolute separation ... I don’t see art as having ever, in a real sense, affected the course of human affairs.” For

itself readily to either of these two critical possibilities, presents us with a serious interpretative challenge.

Nabokov's 1955 novel is a book that hardly needs an introduction. A *succès de scandale* at the time of its publication, a book whose publication coincided with the nascent debate and interest in the sexual practices of the American nation, it propelled its creator to the ranks of the most important authors of the Twentieth century.<sup>240</sup> The tantalizingly sub-titled "Confessions of a White Widowed Male" have long lost their reputation of a "dirty book."<sup>241</sup> Nonetheless, they have not ceased to provoke vehement controversy. There have been those who begrudged the novel's highly controversial plot – the criminal cohabitation of a middle-aged European man and his pre-pubescent American concubine. Others have devoted countless pages to explanations of its intricate structure and style, and recognized Nabokov's place among the most finely attuned observers and analysts of the American mode of life. Still others have discerned, behind the sophisticated word games and bemusing descriptive choices of the novel, a calculated

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further reading, see Greenberg, op.cit. 190. The remark was made in an exchange on modernist criticism with art historian T.J. Clark.

<sup>240</sup> *Lolita's* contribution to the discourse on gender identity and sexuality within the American context is very significant. It was published in a climate, very much influenced by the controversy caused by the infamous scientific surveys of sexual behavior among men and women, better known as the Kinsey reports of 1948 and 1953, respectively. The latter touched a peculiarly American nerve as they examined the boundary between abnormal and normal sexual activity and challenged myths about the presumed "innocence," or sexual naiveté, of American women.

<sup>241</sup> Lucy Maddox summarizes the attitudes of several critics who qualified *Lolita* as "a dirty book" in the highly amusing opening paragraph of her chapter on *Lolita* in her *Nabokov's Novels in English*, p. 67. For a more recent overview, see D. Barton Johnson and Brian Boyd's essay titled "The Otherworld" in *Nabokov's World*, vol. 1

insult to the very tenets of morality.<sup>242</sup> The following quote by critic M. Winston successfully demonstrates the range of interpretative possibilities the novel has invited:

The book's protagonist, narrator, and supposed author, Humbert Humbert, continually forces us to maintain a double perspective by calling on us to pass moral and legal judgment upon him as a man and aesthetic judgment upon him as an artist. [...]The murderer, madman, and pedophile is balanced against the artistic creator, stylist, lover of language, and master of literary allusion. Although Humbert sometimes tries to separate his Jekyll and Hyde aspects, as when he assures us that "the gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets - *not* crime's prowling ground" (p. 133), his own book proves that the same habits of mind guide both writer and criminal.<sup>243</sup>

Despite the changing social and philosophical framework and the evolution of criticism in the fifty-odd years since the novel's publication, interpretation of *Lolita* remains divided along the same ethics / aesthetics line of demarcation illustrated by the quote above. Let us consider them briefly here. As early as 1966, Page Stegner's book

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<sup>242</sup> In her analysis of *Lolita*, critic Rachel Bowlby, for example, departs from the premise that the novel is proof that it is "in breaking with the moral standards of society that literature's distance from a banal conformity can be measured." (Bowlby, 156)

<sup>243</sup> Winston, p. 421. Two other interpretative possibilities are mentioned in the introduction to Rachel Bowlby's excellent study of the poetry of advertising in *Lolita*. She describes the cover of her 1969 British Corgi paperback which adds two more to the vast array of opinions the novel provoked. Admiration and sarcastic dismissal share the page once again. First, one sees Lionel Trilling's enthusiastic endorsement of Nabokov's novel. He calls it "a book not about sex, but about love." (For more information on Trilling's interpretation of *Lolita*, see "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*," op.cit.) Trilling's words are followed by Bernard Levin who attributes it "a permanent place on the very highest shelf of the world's didactic literature" (Bowlby, 155).

*Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* presented an analysis which extolled Vladimir Nabokov's merits as a "cold virtuoso aesthete."<sup>244</sup> She portrayed a novelist, carried away by his own eloquence, vast erudition and malicious knack for literary puns. Clearly analyzing the novel's form at the expense of its content, Stegner would advise the reader to see "through the surface of this perversion" in order to discover Humbert's longing "for an ideal state that nymphets represent, a quality that exists beyond space and time."<sup>245</sup> Her general thesis is that *Lolita* is concerned solely with demonstrating that great art has nothing to do with the constraints of conventional morality. It was taken up in a number of subsequent studies which attempt to demonstrate that the artist who creates a masterpiece need not abide by the laws that govern lesser mortals' behavior. Similarly, Alfred Appel would remark, in the *Annotated Lolita*, that "Nabokov's constant theme is the creative process, masked, but not obscured by the novel's ostensible subject, sexual perversion."<sup>246</sup>

It was not until the 1980s that other pertinent aspects of the novel began to attract attention. On the opposite side of the interpretative spectrum we see a score of critics attempting to "redeem" the moral value of the work by insisting that Humbert recognizes having wronged his beloved. His decision to immortalize Lolita by turning her into a work of art has been interpreted as Nabokov's attempt to vindicate his protagonist. Others claim that Humbert's actions have been performed *despite his better judgment*.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Toker, 2

<sup>245</sup> Stegner, 47

<sup>246</sup> Appel, xxlvi

<sup>247</sup> Several critics have gone as far as to explore a link between *Lolita* and Greek tragedy, drawing parallels between Humbert's obsession with pre-pubescent girls and *harmatia*. The latter term, introduced in

Elizabeth Dipple, for example, claims that, in “HH and Lolita’s last meeting,” the protagonist has come to a recognition of the evil he had caused. This recognition proves that he possesses “higher ethics” which allow “his narrow sexual obsession” to be replaced “by a genuine love and moral apprehension of the person in front of him.”<sup>248</sup> She claims that,

By the end of the novel Humbert's obsession for Lolita is a metaphysical rather than a sexual one (he misses the sound of her voice more than her physical presence), his confession having purged him of guilt and his perceptions having passed through the

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Aristotle’s *Poetics*, designates a specific predicament, or tragic circumstances, brought about as a result of an error of judgment.

<sup>248</sup> Dipple, 82. Similarly, Leona Toker, sees the book as producing a cathartic effect upon the reader by “lulling us ... into long spans of sympathy for Humbert and then punishes us for our temporary suspension of judgment.” Toker suggests that Nabokov had “drawn his conclusion of the ennobling effect of art from Schopenhauer's belief in the power of aesthetic enjoyment to put to sleep the insistent urgings of the malevolent will.” What’s more, after being cleansed by his aesthetic achievement, Nabokov’s criminal protagonist emerges as a better man. So sincerely does Toker want to see Humbert “cured” that she goes as far as to claim that, having seen pregnant Dolly Schiller after the years of separation, he recognizes the ways in which he crippled her and is thoroughly transformed by this realization. His obsession with nymphets becomes a thing of the past: “The Coalmont episode thus seems to produce a therapeutic effect on the protagonist; symptomatically, as it were, the two very young girls whom he later sees in Pavor Manor excite nothing but pity and disgust – “so young, so lewd.” The wishful thinking reaches its climax in her interpretation of the close of the novel. Speculating that Humbert actually invented everything that took place after the receipt of Dolly's letter (a claim which the text would support provided that we believe the dates cited by Humbert at the beginning of the narrative), she attributes the “invention” of the subsequent episodes to Humbert's desire to break with his criminal past and obtain forgiveness for his behavior. Toker sees Quilty’s murder as stemming from Humbert’s need to “return to normality” and is thus presented as the ritual and purgatory killing of the nemesis, the evil double. Having annihilated the arch-criminal, Humbert has obtained forgiveness for his own transgressions. For more information, see Toker, 198-221

reintegrating prisms of imagination. ... The Lolita who finally emerges from the book is neither the nymphet of his solipsism nor the child he victimized but the palpable ghost of artifice: "another, fanciful Lolita-perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own" (L, p. 64). Neither, of course, does Humbert; he is part and parcel of the very vision he has narrated. Along with Lolita he has died and yet lives, for Nabokov has immortalized him as well. ... To Nabokov, Lolita's tragedy is profound not so much because she has been sexually and diabolically exploited but because, having been deprived of her childhood, she is abandoned in a fluid paradise that time and chance have turned to weeds and that only memory and its articulation can enchant and redeem again. Humbert knows this on his pulses; hence his habitual word games.<sup>249</sup>

If I have decided to quote Dipple at length, it is because her point of view is a rather typical one. Analyses which tend to represent Humbert as a man driven to act as he does despite his better judgment<sup>250</sup> attempt to depict him as a victim rather than a criminal. They are also largely at odds with Nabokov's own take on his oeuvre. The Russian-American writer adamantly refused to be taken as a moralist or a novelist interested in extolling the aesthetic at any price. In the "Afterword" to *Lolita* he insists that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction" (L, 286). On more than one occasion, he showed his disapproval of the label of "moral satirist" sometimes attributed to him.<sup>251</sup> In an interview conducted in 1967, he corrects his interviewer Herbert Gold when the latter suggests that Nabokov's "sense of the immorality of the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita is very strong": "It is not *my* sense [...] that is strong, it is Humbert's

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<sup>249</sup> In Dipple, 86

<sup>250</sup> Hubier, 9

<sup>251</sup> Appel, "Conversations with Nabokov," 212



sense. *I do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere.*"<sup>252</sup> In the same interview, the novelist points out that "Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch"<sup>253</sup> who manages to appear 'touching.' That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl,"<sup>254</sup> he would claim. Similarly, critics who attempt to interpret *Lolita* solely along the lines of the redemptive power of the aesthetic experience would likewise fall short of doing it justice, even though the novel strings us along with references to some of the most significant contributors to the theory of the aesthetic experience. The narrative is interspersed with references to the creative process, as well

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<sup>252</sup> Gold, 196

<sup>253</sup> The careful reader is hardly surprised by this harsh characterization. Nabokov's choice of name reveals a plethora of meanings. It speaks volumes about the author's attitude towards his protagonist and therefore it seems to me that it deserves a bit of attention.

The name choices in all of Nabokov's novels provide him with endless opportunity to exercise his considerable wit and knack for allusion and alliteration. A multi-lingual writer, he selects names which would underscore certain characteristics as well as convey his own attitude towards the persona in question. Humbert Humbert's double name alludes to his duality. As the novel progresses, he would coin several other nicknames for himself, keeping with the self-reflexive alliteration. They range from Humbert the Hoarse to Humbert the Hound to Humbert the Hamburger, thereby giving way to multiple reflections that mangle mangle his already distorted self as fun-house mirrors would. To the ear attuned to English, Humbert Humbert intones "a very nasty, very suggestive ... double rumble ... a hateful name for a hateful person " Nabokov has said (In *Strong Opinions*, p. 26). He might have added that to the ear attuned to French (Humbert was born in Paris and raised on the Riviera), the sound of Humbert mimics ombre, or shadow. Alfred Appel has demonstrated that Humbert Humbert is only a shadow of a whole man, a penumbra isolated in an obsessional world of sexual perversion. A similar shadow is reflected in the demonic presence of Quilty. And since shadows of shadows do not exist among Nature's signs and symbols, he rightfully speaks of the "black Humberland" (*L*, 168), or ombreland, of his perversion, the colorless caverns of the dead in which he seeks to entrap Lolita forever.

<sup>254</sup> Gold, 197

as a variety of artists and theories.<sup>255</sup> Still, Nabokov would not want us to be limited within the confines of this interpretation, either.

Part of the reason why reading *Lolita* is such a challenging task is because this complicated work of art is, I believe, one of the few truly original novels of the Twentieth century. The analysis is hindered further by Nabokov's uncanny capacity to anticipate and manipulate the conventional axes of interpretation his readers would be tempted by. This carefully crafted teaser of a novel plays along with the reactions of the audience. Reducing the analysis to a mere boiling down of the arguments of two large and all-encompassing entities such as the ethical and the aesthetic, certainly offers valuable insight into many important aspects. However, it ultimately fails to do justice to the overall intention of the novel. If we are to believe John Ray, Jr., author of the Foreword, who, according to many, is Nabokov's mouthpiece, the novel's "aphrodisiac scenes" are deliberately obfuscated behind the banalities accompanying legal discourse. John Ray claims that the sexual instances are "the most strictly functional ones in the development of a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis." (*L*, 4) As this statement reveals, Nabokov did not feel the need to pit the moral and the aesthetic against one another. Instead of prompting the reader to choose between two options, the novel is interested in exploring a new realm where the two can come together. This alternative space of existence is the "state of being where art's the norm". The author announces it in the Afterward to the novel.

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<sup>255</sup> Edgar Allan Poe is frequently referenced, as is Aubrey Beardsley, one of the fathers of contemporary aesthetic theory.

This chapter attempts to describe Nabokov's alternative universe which, I'd like to argue, is characterized not by mutually exclusive opposites, but by the possibility for coexistence of the very same seemingly irreconcilable entities. The "states of being where art's the norm" are defined by a comprehensive form of reality from which the mediocrity and oppressive ugliness which, to Nabokov's narrator, are synonymous with everyday existence, have been definitively banned. The first part of the study deals with the ways in which Nabokov lures the reader into the alternative space through his inimitable use of language and forces him to rethink conventional categories. The outcome of such a move is opening the reader's mind to the possibility of suspending judgment and thinking outside of the realm of conventional human behavior. My analysis attempts to demonstrate that we as readers have no choice but to be implicated in the novel and exercise a judgment. Armed with a better understanding of the constraints we ourselves impose upon our reading of *Lolita*, we will then be in a position to understand what the alternative realm consists of. Consequently, we will be in a position to read the book *on its own terms*. Most importantly, we will be able to analyze the ways in which seemingly contrasting alternatives are skillfully reconciled.

## II.

Throughout his career, Nabokov has constantly demonstrated that he did not believe in literature as a means of depicting or immortalizing reality. This attitude is as true of his literary criticism as it is of his take on his own fiction. His fascinating lectures on literature have been described as "virtually avant-garde in their author's insistence on divorcing the worlds that novelists create from what dull readers call 'real life.'"<sup>256</sup> In the study of Gogol, for example, he would insist that *Dead Souls* should never be used as a guide into the mores and ways of nineteenth-century Russia. He sees Gogol's principal achievement as "one of language and not of ideas."<sup>257</sup> We see a similar contempt for the so-called *literature of ideas* in the Afterward to *Lolita*. There, Nabokov would point out that it is "nothing but topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann."<sup>258</sup> Famously dismissive of the majority of his contemporary fellow-writers, he praised only those who force us to rethink the relation between fiction and reality. He admired Borges, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet. Much like those three authors' oeuvre, Nabokov's works aim at a dissociation of art and reality. In the rare event of accepting to talk about his writing (he generally preferred to let the reader draw his own conclusions), he flatly denied that he had anything in particular to say about the contemporary world. In the foreword to his 1947 novel *Bend Sinister*, he states point blank that "art means nothing to society." He goes on to claim that terms such as "real life" and "reality" should never appear in print

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<sup>256</sup> Prescott, 96

<sup>257</sup> In *Nikolay Gogol*, 150

<sup>258</sup> *Lolita*, 258

unless mocked and jostled by inverted commas.<sup>259</sup> The novel, which many hastened to qualify as “political” was, in the author’s view, only a collection of "absurd mirages" that fade away when he, the writer, "dismiss[es] the cast."<sup>260</sup> “I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it,” he would claim, and go on to insist that he “worked hard ... on a body of words until it grant[ed] [him] complete possession and pleasure.”<sup>261</sup>

The American novelist William Gass called Nabokov a "fabulator", a writer whose creations remain "self-contained artifacts"<sup>262</sup> and lack content in the traditional sense of the word. Other appraisals of Nabokov's work qualified him as a writer not interested in things as they are but, rather, invested in the crafting of supreme fantasies. Along the same lines, John Updike notes in his Introduction to the first volume of Nabokov’s Collected Works that "in any decade Nabokov's approach would have seemed radical in the degree of severance between reality and art that it supposes."<sup>263</sup> Thus, Nabokov’s literary works are, as David Rampton, one of his most insightful critics observes, "self-reflexive forms that constantly advertise their own artificiality, [...] demonstrations, overt or implicit, of his conviction that art and life have little, if anything, to do with each other."<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> *Bend Sinister*, op.cit., vii

<sup>260</sup> Rampton, 4

<sup>261</sup> In *Strong Opinions*, interview with Garnham, 115

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Updike, quoted in *The Annotate Lolita*, xxv

<sup>264</sup> Rampton, 3

It is certain that even a perfunctory glance at *Lolita* confirms the observation that art and life end up completely estranged in Nabokov's fiction. Throughout the narrative, the writer frequently reminds us that we are in the process of reading a work of fiction.<sup>265</sup> As is the case with the other works we will consider in this study, the entire text of the novel is a retrospective narrative. It is a *post-factum* reappraisal of events, presented to us in chronological order. The extraordinary tale we are reading is one detailing Humbert Humbert's obsession with pre-pubescent girls of certain bewitching qualities and sex-appeal. He would dub them "nymphets" in order to distinguish them from their more ordinary peers. Having lusted after these young creatures for years, he finally stumbles upon one whom he manages to entrap. The majority of the narrative follows the two of them as they travel across America. In the course of this cohabitation, Humbert is able to realize even his wildest and most far-fetched fantasies. It is important to bear in mind that, throughout the narrative, Humbert Humbert is in total control. The information he chooses to divulge to the reader is entirely up to him. He can effectively manipulate what facts he would reveal. "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with" (*L*, 32), he would exclaim, ruefully, at the beginning of the narrative. Some have been tempted to analyze this statement as proof of Humbert's utter helplessness and moral torment in jail. I consider it the ultimate irony of the novel and one we have been made aware of,

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<sup>265</sup> One of the narrative techniques most frequently used is divulging the entire plot or parts of it from the start (*Laughter in the Dark*). Nabokov also has a tendency to elucidate his techniques as he uses them (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*); to interrupt the progression of events to address the reader (*Transparent Things*), to talk to the printer (*Lolita*) directly; to manifest his presence anagrammatically (in Vivian Darkbloom, the name of Quilty's "collaborator" in *Lolita*, and in Adam von Librikov, the name of an incidental character who appears in a novel written by a novelist who appears in *Transparent Things*).

deliberately, at the very beginning. As he “plays” with words, Humbert Humbert is playing with the reader. The backwards glance is a most misleading artistic strategy. Humbert is a cunning storyteller, who is juggling multiple versions simultaneously. A number of “narratives” surface in the course of the novel. When Lolita’s mother finds her charming foreign husband’s journal (itself a copy of an already-destroyed first draft), he is naturally horrified. Yet he calmly removes the evidence, already making plans to tamper with it: "Rewrite. Let her read it again. She will not recall details. Change, forge. Write a fragment and show it to her or leave it lying around" (*L*, 97). As critic Lucy Maddox points out, Humbert has to go through every experience twice. He blunders through it initially, and then has to sort out and reorder the events. As a result, his narrative emerges out of a veritable “tangle of thorns.”<sup>266</sup>

The most important function of the retrospective narrative is that it allows the formulation of a perfected alternative reality. "Both memory and imagination are a negation of time", Vladimir Nabokov points out in an interview.<sup>267</sup> An unmistakable homage to Marcel Proust, an author Nabokov revered, is discernible in this sentence. Even more than a negation of the passage of time, it would seem as though memory and imagination are the only forces one can oppose to an ordinary, vulgar and quotidian mode of existence. I would like to suggest that the inspiration behind *Lolita* is above all the need to rethink and reorder bits and pieces of reality and thereby re-create it in a way which would surpass the drab and senseless "everyday living".

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<sup>266</sup> Maddox, 67. Here, the critic borrows a phrase from *Lolita*. Humbert himself, when addressing his reader jury, refers to the novel as a “tangle of thorns.” (*L*, 45)

<sup>267</sup> *Strong Opinions*, op.cit., 78

The need for an alternative to the quotidian is a theme which runs throughout *Lolita*. We are constantly reminded of the artificiality of the novel we are experiencing. Reminders of forging and fraud abound, as do references to photography, movies, cameras, recordings, theatres, productions etc. Humbert and Lolita frequently go to the movies in the course of their travels. While a student at Beardsley, she is involved in the school drama club. There is no doubt that Nabokov has made a conscious choice to inscribe the whole narrative within the specific frame of reference of the visual arts. By doing so, he is constantly reinforcing the fictional paradigm within which the novel must be considered. The choice of artistic medium is hardly surprising. Theatre and cinema appeal simultaneously to our visual and auditory perceptions. Hence, successfully plunge the spectator into an alternative space, governed by its own rules of conduct and understanding. Thus, theatre and cinema **become** the outward references to that parallel space in the novel.

I suggest we take a closer look at the obsession with aspects of the performing arts which, for the sake of brevity and illustration, I refer to as Nabokov's "screens and stages". In addition to providing us with a backdrop against which the plot unravels, they allow us an in-depth analysis of Nabokov's language. The latter is instrumental to the consideration of the states of being where art's the norm. Since Nabokov's language is extremely sophisticated and ornate, let us start with the simplest illustrations. The novel is interspersed with striking descriptive sequences which have solicited no small amount of critical attention. For example, in the first part of the novel, Humbert often dreams of some natural or human disaster, which would miraculously put him in the proximity of a cooperative nymphet: "A shipwreck. An atoll. Alone with a drowned passenger's



shivering child. Darling, this is only a game” (*L*, 20). We see here that the setting is marked by a series of successive fleeting images rather than related through a lengthy narrative. Later, a similar setting will reappear, altered and embellished. The general fantasy would come into focus and be tailored to include Lolita and her mother. “I long for some terrible disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. Her mother is messily but instantly and permanently eliminated, along with everybody else for miles around (*L*, 53). This deliberate consistency and parallelism of the imagery suggests an internal structure, similar to that of a film, in which consistency of the narrative is related through a uniformity of the setting.

In the descriptions of the characters, we observe a similar narrative strategy. It is through flashing images, rather than lengthy descriptions, that we meet the personae of the novel. What’s more, in almost all cases, the characters are engaged in some activity. To quote but one example: the first time we are introduced to Charlotte, Humbert’s second wife, she is coming down a flight of stairs. The gaze of the narrator and the reader move simultaneously, literally following her every step: “A bit of cigarette ash dropped from there in addition. Presently, the lady herself – sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order – came down the steps, her index finger still tapping upon his cigarette” (*L*, 37). Charlotte’s image is truncated by her descent down the stairs. She materialized in a series of impressions rather than a logical descriptive narrative. Once she reaches the last step, we will get a good look at her and realize she is “in her middle thirties”, has a “shiny forehead”, “plucked eyebrows”, “quite simple but not unattractive features.” (*L*, 37) It comes as no surprise that she will be likened to an actress. She appears to be a “weak solution” of none other but one of Hollywood’s

biggest screen legends, Marlene Dietrich. This unexpected parallel, coupled with the idiosyncratic description, serve to inscribe her firmly into the realm of the fictional and the cinematographic.

A notable parallel structure is observed in the “framing” of Lolita and Humbert’s relationship as illustrated by the references to three important backdrops, the house in Ramsdale where they meet, the rented home in Beardsley where Lolita hatches the plan to escape from her captor, and the shack in Coalmont where their paths would cross for the last time. We would recognize fragments of the Ramsdale home which have made their way right into the description of the Beardsley and Coalmont houses. Situated four hundred miles away, the Beardsley house “bore a dejected resemblance to the Haze home.” It is “a dull gray frame affair with a shingled roof and dull green drill awnings.” The rooms are smaller and furnished in a more consistent plush-and-plate style, yet “arranged in much the same order.” The Coalmont house, in turn, is located in a virtual wasteland: “dismal district, all dump and ditch, and wormy vegetable garden, and shack, and gray drizzle, and red mud, and several smoking stacks in the distance.” It is a dingy gray clapboard affair, “with two or three similar ones farther away from the road and a waste of withered weeds all around.” These weeds are by no means accidental – they stand in sharp contrast with the Eden-like garden in the Ramsdale home in which Lolita and Humbert meet for the first time. Last but not least, we should mention that in these homes, we will invariably find a piece of furniture of the sofa variety, upon which a number of momentous events take place. In Ramsdale, it is the striped couch we will examine momentarily. In Beardsley, there would be several mentions of Lolita’s favorite overstuffed chair, from which she observes Humbert, mocking him with her “heartless

vaporous eyes.” In Coalmont, there is a divan which doubles as the young couple’s bed, upon which Humbert and his daughter sit as they are reunited. These are mundane details, but they invariably preclude some major revelation about the nature of the characters’ relationship. In this carefully crafted novel, the consistency of the set design and the decor and their variations allow us to trace the transformation the characters undergo.

As the examples above clearly demonstrate, Nabokov’s descriptions are constructed around an assembly of fragments which constitute a verbal puzzle of interlocking elements. Sometimes, these fragments will constitute fleeting impressions. Frequently, however, they will frame significantly larger events. All important scenes in *Lolita* are grand and elaborate cinematographic productions, planned out in the narrator’s mind. To name but just a few: Desperate to get rid of his wife, Humbert will imagine Charlotte’s possible drowning in Hourglass Lake to the smallest detail. He would choose the perfect setting “for a brisk bubbling murder.” (*L*,86) He would even position his witnesses conveniently: just far enough to be incapable of discerning exactly what is going on, but close enough to be able to testify there was no foul play on the part of the bereft husband. Similarly, the first night Lolita and Humbert spend together in the Enchanted Hunters Hotel has taken days to dream and prepare. Of these productions, Quilty’s murder, staged to appear like a crime of passion, would be the most heavily premeditated.

All of this careful staging has been designed to keep the reader constantly aware of the ruse and the construction of the novel-as-artwork. It is up to the reader to recognize the sequences and fit all pieces together. The narrative hinges upon the reader’s ability to see the subtle logical connections. In many ways, it is he that holds the narrative

together. The readers are the ones who allow Humbert to “exist.” They succumb to his pleas and carry out his recommendations: “Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist, if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little.” (*L*, 129)

Let us now turn our attention to the ways in which this narrative strategy plays out in one of the most memorable scenes of the novel. The Striped Couch Scene is perhaps one of the most unforgettable moments of the narrative. Early on in his boarding days, one Sunday morning, Humbert reaches an orgasm while he pretends to be teasing Dolores, unsuspectingly sprawled across his knees. (In a typical Nabokovian dash of humor, the young lady has refused to accompany her mother at church and this is how she finds herself alone with the boarder.) The beginning of the scene is introduced to the readers in the following manner: “Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph. Mexican knickknacks” (*L*, 57). Everything is meticulously recorded: Dolores' attire, her position on the sofa, down to the *plop* with which a “banal, Eden-red apple” falls back into her hands after being tossed up in the air. “Pity no film has recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves” (*L*, 57), Humbert would explain. What he's really doing, though, is inviting us to recognize that the camera is present all the same, in the skillful arrangement of words and details. In a way, **we are the camera**. The reader's curiosity is piqued. He has no choice but to be a voyeur. He is led by the type of curiosity which makes one revel

in salacious details. The narrator asks that the reader follow him and imagine the scene: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay.” (*L*, 57 ) The “learned readers” are expected to oblige. As a matter of fact, they end up so involved in the detailed description of his erotic machinations that they might even fear that Humbert gets caught. We are treated to an elaborate assembly of grinding and sliding and rubbing and touching, culminating in a powerful orgasm. We experience a semblance of relief that the scene has passed without incident. However, by being conned into participating fully in the narrative, we are also invited to suspend our moral judgment. We may even let ourselves be swayed by Humbert's retrospective view of the scene as an artistic triumph and ignore the clearly disturbing fact that an adult has derived sexual pleasure from the physical contact with an unsuspecting minor(*L*, 58) Humbert tries to convince us. Even the most unyielding of moral judgments would be tempted to see some truth to that. The Striped Couch scene is key to the understanding of *Lolita*. More than any other scene of the novel, it reveals the devious power of Nabokov’ narrative technique. Words are the only means through which we are led through a range of conflicting emotions we are unable to control.

The high degree of manipulation is achieved through words, and words alone. All of the authors in this study owe their popularity to their skillful modes of expression. Vladimir Nabokov’s virtuosity is unparalleled. At the time of *Lolita*’s publication, he was hailed as the most accomplished writer of the English language – a valuable recognition for someone whose native language was Russian.<sup>268</sup> Nabokov’s idiosyncratic language is due in part to his background as a scientist. Passionate about lepidopterological research

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<sup>268</sup> Updike, 221.

(butterfly gathering and taxonomy), the writer remains a major scientist in the field.<sup>269</sup> He has received credit for the identification, naming and classification of a number of hitherto unknown species. In an interview, he once shared that he infinitely enjoyed “the tactile delights of precise delineation, the silent paradise of the camera lucida, and the precision of poetry in taxonomic description represent the artistic side of the thrill that accumulation of new knowledge, absolutely useless to the layman, gives its first begetter.”<sup>270</sup> This statement, incontestably referring to the activities of a scientist, nonetheless provides an allegory to his work as an artist. The subtle delight that the lepidopterist feels while engaged in his very specific research stems from the pleasure he takes in the act of carefully discerning, classifying and ordering minute objects whose meaning is only revealed whenever they all come together. Reading *Lolita*, we have a sense that the writer enjoys doing precisely that as well.

Thus, I’d like to suggest that we can establish a parallel between the scientific and the artistic process in Nabokov’s oeuvre. The novel abounds in passages in which, presented with a long list of characteristics, we are left to derive our own conclusions about the real state of affairs they refer to, and “classify” the situation in a manner of speaking. Two of the most poignant examples are found in Part One. Upon setting eyes on Charlotte Haze’s house, the "white-frame horror, ... more gray than white", where he’s been offered lodging for the summer, Humbert immediately identifies it as "the kind

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<sup>269</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the influence of Nabokov’s lepidopterical research on his writing, see Diana Butler’s. "Lolita Lepidoptera," op. cit.. Even though later critics have found some of Butler’s claims erroneous, the article provides us with an excellent introduction into the ways in which the universe of the literary and that of the scientific overlapped in Nabokov’s novels.

<sup>270</sup> Interview with Alfred Appel, 33

of place you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet in lieu of shower" (*L*, 36). After Charlotte takes him around, his worst fears are confirmed. By the time they reach the bathroom,

the lodger-lover could hardly conceal a shudder when he, a very fastidious male, was granted a preview of the only bathroom, a tiny oblong between the landing and "Lo's room", with limp wet things overhanging the dubious tub (the question mark of a hair inside); and there was the expected coils of the rubber snake, and its complement – a pinkish cozy, coyly covering the toilet lid (*L*, 38).

The unmistakable phallic details of this description – what with the limp wet things and the coils of the rubber snake, preclude the sexual nature of all encounters under the Haze roof and serve to introduce the amorous triangle between the lodger, the mother and the daughter. The analogy is as poignant as it is subtle but, after all, the greatest merit of Nabokov's prose lies in his ability to allow the reader to decipher clues. Thus, as we follow Humbert around Charlotte's home, we experience the lack of hygiene and style through a careful selection and arrangement of objects and impressions. Much like in taxonomy, what we have here is a type, a species of humans, which has been described through the specific characteristics of the space they inhabit. Nabokov was well acquainted with this species. Alfred Appel reminds us that the writer and his wife never owned a home in the US and used to rent the houses of the writer's colleagues who happened to be on sabbatical leaves. Charlotte Haze's house has therefore inherited many of the characteristic features of these American homes. They seem to have surprised, horrified and amused the Nabokovs in equal measure. Whatever the case, Charlotte's

house speaks volumes about her character, her background, her pretensions and her social aspirations. More than an individual, she is a “symbol” and a “specimen.”

The same narrative strategy – that of illustrating facts rather than stating them - is employed in a frequently overlooked, but rather important part of the novel. Chapter 33, the *coda* to Part One, is rather brief and opens with a shopping list of sorts. Humbert and Lolita have shared a bed the night before and have become, in all of fifteen minutes, "technically lovers" (*L*, 132). Immediately preceding the passage quoted below, Lolita has also found out that her mother is not sick, as she was previously led to believe, but dead:

In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments – swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks (*L*, 142)

The passage avoids any mention of the life-changing events of the previous day. It is up to the reader to decipher Humbert’s complex state of mind. He has obtained that which he craved and strived towards his whole adult life. He is only too glad to shower his prepubescent concubine with gifts and thereby ensure her complicity for the future. His generosity is provoked in equal measure by a feeling of guilt: afraid of Lolita's reaction once the initial shock settles, he would rather keep her distracted and invested in immediate pleasures than have to deal with the emotional trauma the young girl is experiencing. He appears completely disengaged and disinterested. It is this very attitude



that is most striking in Humbert: he keeps his cool when faced with what most would consider a heart-wrenching predicament. At the same time, it is certain that, recounting the events some five years after they have taken place, he is most likely omitting the disturbing several hours between the time he tells Dolores her mother is dead and the shopping trip. Similarly, what the reader might fail to notice is that, buried underneath a wealth of other objects – for if we try to imagine the buys together, they would form a veritable heap of indulgence goods, the box of sanitary pads is like a false note, a faintly ominous sign. It points to the physicality of Humbert and Lolita's sexual encounter and signals a growing up, a parting with childhood, an entry into the life of adults. It also speaks, quite literally, of the pain and violation that their intercourse should always be associated with. In typical Nabokovian fashion, however, it is up to the reader to discern the carefully hidden object and understand a plethora of powerful messages.

Talking about the language of *Lolita* is a formidable task. The novel reads like a motley catalogue, a textbook assembly of virtually every artistic device ever employed in literature. Nabokov's erudite vocabulary constantly underscores the coincidental logic and artificiality of language. The narrator delights in coming up with an array of puns which often "strain the sense of his world to the bursting point."<sup>271</sup> Thus Humbert tells us that the forgotten name of a Russian taxi driver "taxies back" to him (*L*, 32); that he sat in his "room" and "ruminated" (*L*, 72); that a young girl named Mabel wears a "halter" although she has "little to halt" (*L*, 75); that the banker Mr. Beale, lying dead on a sloping lawn after being tossed from his car, is a "banked banker" (*L*, 100); that while shopping

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<sup>271</sup> As per Ralph A. Ciancio's elegant phrasing. Ciancio, p. 521. Ciancio's article "Nabokov and the Verbal Mode of the Grotesque" is an excellent guide into the highly sophisticated and frankly amusing word games Nabokov plays with his reader.

for *Lolita* he examines "pumps of crushed kid for crushed kids" (*L*, 110); that a "very cheeky nurse with overdeveloped gluteal parts" (*L*, 243) suspects him of "creeping up on" *Lolita* in "crepe soles" (*L*, 244). The list can go on for quite some time. Nabokov would likewise amuse himself and the reader by bringing in a score of anagrams and oxymorons.<sup>272</sup> Unsurprisingly, his stories abound in synthetic impressions. Occasionally, an anacoluthon would rend the syntax. Although more subtle, the grammatical illogic intrinsic to zeugma also manifests itself. For example, when mud delays Humbert's pursuit of *Lolita* and Quilty by car, his "rear wheels only whined in slosh and anguish" (*L*, p. 283). The narrative is livened by the comic incongruity intrinsic to syllepsis – Humbert burns "with desire and dyspepsia" (*L*, 132).<sup>273</sup>

All of these narrative devices fill the novel with clues which the narrator must follow. Nabokov's skill in luring the audience and implicating it in the narration is

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<sup>272</sup> Among the most noteworthy ones: Humbert speaks of a "repulsively handsome White Russian" (*L*, 157), another person's "ponderous spryness" (*L*, 195), of the "friendly abyss" (*L*, 309), of his "rack of joy" (*L*, 186) and the "prison cell of paradise" (*L*, 147), *Lolita*'s "listening eyes" (*L*, 63) and the "hot thunder of her whisper" (*L*, 135), of his "vulgar darling" (*L*, 119) whom he fondles with "timid claws" (*L*, 58), and of being "passionately parched" (*L*, 241) on one occasion, "lucidly insane, crazily calm" (*L*, 296) on another. Nabokov makes us aware of a special kind of oxymoron composed of words that, juxtaposed, are incongruous owing to the conflicting colors they harbor unsuspectingly, ... These are "cryptochromatic" terms, the hues and tints of which, as in photism, are made to bear upon their lexical meaning. Rather than "blackmail" Charlotte, which is too strong a term for what Humbert contemplates doing to her, he ponders "mauvemail" (*L*, 73) instead. In Dr. Blanche Schwarzmann's name (she is an incidental figure in *Lolita*) the "cryptochromism" of words is combined with their "cryptosexuality" in French and German.

<sup>273</sup> For more examples of Nabokov's skillful manipulation of a vast array of literary devices, see Ciancio, Ralph. "Nabokov and the Verbal Mode of the Grotesque," op. cit., and Butler, Steven H. "*Lolita* and the Modern Experience of Beauty"

unprecedented. We are given ample information about the setting and particularities of each scene, down to the smallest details. This is in part why the majority of the people who read *Lolita* feel compelled to exercise their moral judgment. Two main reasons explain this choice on Nabokov's part. On the one hand, he seems determined to show us how easy it is to be seduced by a soft-spoken and eloquent villain. On the other, he is pushing us to figure out what it is that drives us so desperately to classify, judge, condemn or absolve the crimes of fictional characters. Critic Noel Carroll's theory provides us a good point of departure in explaining the mechanism according to which the reader becomes a part of the narrative and consequently feels compelled to exercise considerable moral judgment. Carroll notes that the nature of artworks possessing narrative content (novels and films) is such that in experiencing them, we are led imaginatively to complete a structure that the work minimally supplies. According to the critic, we cannot experience the full and proper effect of a narrative artwork without engaging in an imaginative process of identification. Such an engagement, in turn, leads us to presuppose that the "aim" of the narrative is internal to itself. We can therefore see how Nabokov, fully aware of this interpretative proclivity on the reader's part, lures him into a realm where he or she would automatically and subconsciously judge Humbert along the lines of conventional morality. This critical mechanism is known in literature as "Moderate Moralism".<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Noel Carroll's theory of "Moderate Moralism" is an appropriate departure point into the exploration of the interplay of the aesthetic and the ethical. The latter has been dubbed the "ethical turn" - in literature. In a series of essays ("Moderate Moralism," "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," and "Moderate Moralism versus Moderate Autonomism"), Carroll offers one a sustained and coherent defense of the idea that artworks, as artworks, are bearers of moral value. Related discussions can be found in Carroll's *A*

Moderate Moralism's central thesis is that "in some instances a moral defect in an artwork can also be an aesthetic defect, and sometimes a moral virtue can count as an aesthetic virtue."<sup>275</sup> In contrast, "Moderate autonomists" maintain that anyone who holds that "[t]he artistic and the moral realms are separate."<sup>276</sup> What Carroll's theory achieves here is above all spelling out some of the problems with the commonplace assumption that the artwork compels us to exercise our powers of moral imagination and judgment. Instead, he insists that "art has nothing to do with moral goodness, or with badness, for that matter, and moral value neither contributes anything to nor subtracts anything from the overall value of the artwork."<sup>277</sup> Carroll is far from being the only one to uphold such a view, which is in part what Nabokov anticipates from his reader. If Nabokov chooses to manipulate skillfully the disapprobation his protagonist will provoke, it is because he wants to underscore the difficulty we have in detaching ourselves from a pre-existing realm of moral judgment. However, if we are incapable of attaining this detachment, we are not likely to be in a position to understand the states of living where art's the norm.

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*Philosophy of Mass Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and in his article, "Morality and Aesthetics," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 3.)

<sup>275</sup> Carroll, "Moderate Moralism versus Moderate Autonomism," p. 419. In "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," Carroll also defends a more specific thesis about narrative artworks such as novels and films. The more specific thesis, "clarificationism," maintains that it is in the nature of narrative artworks (as opposed to artworks in general) that they "can deepen our moral understanding by, among other things, encouraging us to apply our moral knowledge and emotions to specific cases. For in being prompted to apply and engage our antecedent moral powers, we may come to augment them." See "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," 142.

<sup>276</sup> Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Levinson, p. 127.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

Before we proceed with a definition of these states of being where art is the norm, let us consider the reasons why Nabokov is so interested in both involving the reader in the narration and refusing to allow a single-sided interpretation of the phenomena at hand. Much like the other authors we have considered in the course of the present study, Nabokov thought of his day and age and of life as it is experienced by ordinary people as an extremely disappointing and futile. He even had a name for it, and a theory which explained it. Understanding Nabokov's need to create a realm of existence where art's the norm is impossible without understanding first a concept central to his oeuvre as a whole – his profound distaste for what he would refer to as *poshlost*'.<sup>278</sup> The states of being where art's the norm are, in my opinion, the very antithesis to this state of mind and type of existence.

The concept of *poshlost*' and its relationship to the plot of *Lolita* is most easily understood if we consider an earlier work which gives us the theoretical tools to address the problem.<sup>279</sup> Chapter Three of Nabokov's study on *Nikolai Gogol* (1944), which leisurely considers the Nineteenth-century Russian writer's masterpiece, *Dead Souls*,<sup>280</sup> is

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<sup>278</sup> I take liberty here to leave the word written exactly as Nabokov would have preferred it to be, for he stated that this is the one "pitiless Russian word which is able to express the idea of a certain widespread defect for which the other three European languages I happen to know possess no special term." See Appel's Introduction to the *Annotated Lolita*, xlvii

<sup>279</sup> Nabokov's fascination and criticism of *poshlost* (which he defined as "corny trash, vulgar clichés, philistinism in all its phases," etc.) is ventilated at length both in his study of Gogol which we have touched upon (*Nikolay Gogol*, op. cit., 63-74), and in a *Paris Review* interview of October 1967. The latter is reprinted in *Strong Opinions*, op. cit., 100-101.

<sup>280</sup> As Alfred Appel points out, several other images, novelistic in their suggestiveness, anticipate *Lolita* directly. In the course of discussing Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Nabokov mocks categorical definitions ("tragedy," "comedy") that digest literary masterpieces as "something as readily assimilated as a

likewise one of the most helpful and illuminating works on Nabokov's oeuvre as a whole. The chapter is titled "Our Mr. Chichikov."<sup>281</sup> The cohesion of the past and the present, signaled by the possessive locution in this brief title reveals Nabokov's conviction that Gogol's protagonist is as relevant to the present as he was to his Nineteenth century. Nabokov depicts Chichikov as a dead soul, trafficking in dead souls and traveling amongst dead souls. He is a criminal whose misdeeds are cloaked in false charm and flowing rhetoric. In order to foreground his discussion of this unusual protagonist, Nabokov would define *poshlost'*, illustrating it with examples from American ads, magazines, and best-sellers.<sup>282</sup> The critical opus on Gogol already anticipated the writing of *Lolita*, a young girl, spellbound by popular culture: "She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster," Humbert will say of her (*L*, 150). Dolores Haze's taste in everything has been formed by the movies she watches and the magazines she reads. Pop-culture surrounds her and influences all her choices. On more than one occasion throughout their cohabitation, Humbert would complain of how conventional and despairingly mediocre of a little girl she is. One of the first statements he pronounces in the very beginning of their trip through America (and uttered in the midst of the most perfect physical happiness and satisfaction):

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hot dog at a football game" (55), an isolated and striking "American" detail typical of at least one thousand phenomena and particles so intrinsic to the creative atmosphere of *Lolita* as to defy taxonomic description, paraphrase, or quotation.

<sup>281</sup> Quite fittingly, Nabokov would also lament that The Reader's Club edition of *Dead Souls* had recently been issued under the title *Chichikov's Journeys, or Homelife in Old Russia*, a change apparently prompted, he states, "by the fear of suggesting gloomy ideas to rosy-cheeked comic strip fans" (*Gogol*, 62)

<sup>282</sup> *Nikolay Gogol*, 66-69

Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth – those were the obvious items on her list of beloved things ... She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* ... If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the object and subject of every foul poster (*L*, 148).

To the wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge. To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would – invariably, with icy precision, plump for the former (*L*, 166).

Throughout the narrative, we would constantly be reminded that Lolita sees matters of sexual and romantic nature through the prism of the mass culture, which has shaped every one of her perceptions. We count no fewer than four magazine posters, adorning the walls above her "chaste bed". Even at the very beginning of his time as Charlotte's border, when he does not yet know Lolita, Humbert is convinced that she would not mind him kissing her: "I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches. A double vanilla with hot fudge – hardly more unusual than that" (*L*, 48). Even though he confesses that he is unsure as to how the knowledge came to him, the narrator nonetheless attributes it to her being a "modern child" – "an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream show close-ups, might not think it too strange, I guessed, if a handsome, intensely virile grown up friend ... " (*L*, 49).

*Lolita* has often been read as an anti-American book owing to the harsh ways in which the author describes reality such as his protagonists experience it. However, it is

extremely important to bear in mind that *poshlost'* is far from being an American phenomenon.<sup>283</sup> What's more, Nabokov is above all interested in demonstrating that *poshlost'* observes no geographic boundaries.<sup>284</sup> True, *Lolita* abounds in descriptions of tattooed porters, drive-in restaurants, gaudy hotels and dreary motels, progressive education, psychoanalysis, and popular culture. Those images are indeed part of a vast gallery of all that Nabokov saw as grotesque in America. There is no doubt that he considered this state of affairs most disturbing. But if he chooses to create a twelve-year old protagonist, highly representative of her day and age, it is because the world she inhabited was not strictly confined to America. "The rich *poshlost'* emanating from advertisements . . . is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser,"<sup>285</sup> he would state. And this false happiness is by no means only advertised in the United States. To this drive towards

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<sup>283</sup> The possessions and home-furnishings of, say, Luzhin's in-laws (*The Defense*, 1930, a novel, set in Russia and written in Russian) would without a doubt have appealed to Charlotte Haze as well.

<sup>284</sup> Although he was never the American Legion type or too outspoken in his support for the USA, Nabokov was always proud to be an American citizen and, during the years in which he lived exclusively in Switzerland, never spoke any ill of America. What's more, he was genuinely troubled that *Lolita* had been welcomed by many readers, especially in Europe, as "good news, a satire of America," and is unsparing in his criticism of some of the post-*Lolita* *Black Humorists* with whom he is sometimes loosely grouped. Alfred Appel notes his indignant qualification of *Catch-22* as "an anti-American book." For more information on Nabokov's "acclimatization" as an American, see Appel, Alfred, "The Road to "Lolita," op. cit, 3-31) Alfred Appel gives us some of the most thorough accounts of Nabokov's imaginative mastery of American *poshlost'*.

<sup>285</sup> *Nikolay Gogol*, 65-66



purchasing goods, Nabokov would oppose the artwork, the only force which the thinking and creative spirit can oppose to the tyranny of *poshlost*'.

### III.

The previous section delineated the major issues Nabokov has with reality as it is experienced by most people. Let us now turn our attention towards the alternative mode of existence the novel proposes. Critic Carol T. Williams opens her discussion of what she refers to as Nabokov's dialectical structure with two lines from one of his poems, "An Evening of Russian Poetry". She uses them as illustration for what she refers to as the essence of the writer's "metaphysical division:"<sup>286</sup> " Not only rainbows - every line is bent, / and skulls and seeds and all good worlds are round." This metaphor is an appropriate point of departure in discussing Nabokov's perception of the alternative state of being where art is the norm. This is a universe, characterized by fluidity and continuity. It is in a state of constant metamorphosis. By making the rainbow the central image of the poem, Nabokov alludes to the harmonious combination of all possible colors. This fragile natural phenomenon creates order out of chaotic splashes of color. The cohabitation of skulls and seeds suggests the interchangeability of life and death. As a result, everything in this universe ends up transformed, re-molded into a different shape. In the following section, we will analyze the ways in which the same idea – of the coexistence of mutually exclusive opposites, drives the narrative of *Lolita* and is found at the core of the Nabokovian alternative universe.

Before we begin describing these states of being, it is important to consider one possible danger such an analysis might bring. *Lolita* is a fictional paradigm in which seemingly irreconcilable entities can co-exist. However, we must be careful not to reduce

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<sup>286</sup> Williams, 250

the novel to what Thomas Frosch has warned us ends up becoming a “literary banality.” As the critic points out, “feeling of being in paradise and hell simultaneously” belongs almost stereotypically to the “romantic domain of sensation.”<sup>287</sup> This is a trap Nabokov has made every effort to avoid through pushing the limits of language and relying heavily on parody and punning. “Let me laugh a little too, gentlemen” (*L*, 252), Humbert would plead with his audience, and invite the reader to join him and laugh along with him. To quote Frosch further, “[P]arody is Nabokov's way of getting as close to the romantic novel as possible and, more, that he actually does succeed in re-creating it in a new form, one that is contemporary and original, not anachronistic and imitative.”<sup>288</sup>

In the preceding section, we saw the ways in which Humbert negotiated the monstrosity of his transgression through a skillful manipulation of the narrative. He takes genuine delight in crafting the story, for within his narration, he is omnipotent. Art becomes his safe haven, yet the refuge it provides is a highly problematical one. If “there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution”<sup>289</sup> (as Nabokov himself would describe his fiction), then, Nabokov's aesthetic insists upon our remarking with equal eye the differences as well as the similarities between life and art. The two-fold nature of the Nabokovian sensibility is felt on the level of the narrative as well. The perspicacious reader has without a doubt made a note of the ubiquity of reflective surfaces the narrative abounds in. Lakes, pools, seashores and mirrors are the most easily identifiable ones to which many more can be added. Figuratively, puns and word games operate as mirror images on the textual level. By sight

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<sup>287</sup> Frosch, 154

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Nabokov, Introduction to *Bend Sinister*, p. xviii.

or sound they produce two or more meanings. Ciancio calls them “right- and left-handed reflections”<sup>290</sup> which flash simultaneously, splintering our outlook on the world.<sup>291</sup> For example, in a particularly amusing turn of phrase, Humbert comes close to articulating the deeper function of Nabokov's puns when he attempts to convince his phantom jury that in his relations with Lolita he acted as the therapist, not the rapist.<sup>292</sup> There is no way

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid

<sup>291</sup> For another type of linguistic mirror image in Nabokov, consider the rhetorical patterns Proffer calls “doublets” (90-95).

<sup>292</sup> Nabokov seems to take genuine delight in luring the critic down a path of psychoanalytical interpretation of his novel. Humbert's obsession with pre-pubescent girls, the infamous nympholepsy, functions as an objective correlative for his experiencing a state of being where art is the norm. A great part of the novel is devoted to discrediting psychoanalysis, which is the greatest obstacle to this perception. From the very beginning of the novel, Humbert admits to being both artist and pervert. Many have been tempted to view his life story as evidence of the neurotic basis of artistic creation. It goes without saying that, in the light of Nabokov's well-known hostility to Freud, this view would be least in keeping with the author's original intention. However, for the purposes of the present study, it will still be instructive to review some of the tactics that Humbert employs to discredit the Freudian view of the artist. The narrative abounds in examples for, as Page Stegner has remarked, “[i]n one sense *Lolita* might be considered an extensive parody of Freudian myths and Freudian explanations for psychological aberration.”

Psychoanalytical interpretations of the artwork generally attempt to elucidate the relation between an artist's life or creative work and his *unconscious* sexual conflicts. Since the psychoanalytical approach only makes sense whenever applied to the unconscious, Humbert's basic tactic is to make clear that he is fully cognizant of his “neurosis” and its origin. He begins his Confession by suggesting that his lifelong passion for nymphets (whom he identifies as girls aged between of nine and fourteen) is the result of his unconsummated boyhood romance with an “initial girl-child” Annabel Leigh. The two are adolescents of similar age whenever they meet and fall in love in a “princedom by the sea”, the French Riviera. Several months later, Annabel would die of typhus. Humbert treasures her memory and thinks of her as the unattainable dream partner he is doomed to search for in every young girl who resembles her. Humbert insists on his consciousness of reliving the past when he meets Lolita some twenty-five years later and

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notes the striking physical resemblance between her and Annabel: “All I want to stress is that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that 'princedom by the sea' in my tortured past. Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them.” (*L*, 40)

Later, after Humbert and Lolita become lovers, they would set off on a series of cross-country travels. He knows that future analysts will expect him to seek a surrogate Riviera to approximate the setting of his romance with Annabel Leigh: “The able psychiatrist who studies my case—and whom by now Dr. Humbert has plunged, I trust, into a state of leporine fascination—is no doubt anxious go have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the 'gratification' of a lifetime urge, and release from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Leigh.” By anticipating such an expectation, Humbert can then deflate it all the more effectively:

Well, comrade, let me tell you that I *did* look for a beach, though I also have to confess that by the time we reached its mirage of gray water, so many delights had already been granted me by my traveling companion that the search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot, far from being the impulse of the subconscious, had become the rational pursuit of a purely theoretical thrill. (*L*, 56)

The efficaciousness of this tactic is obvious. Since the analysis is already conscious of his impulse, the analyst is reduced to silence. Humbert's objection to the Freudian view is voiced forthrightly when he states: “It is not the artistic aptitudes that are secondary sexual characters as some shams and shamans have said; it is the other way around: sex is but the ancilla of art.” (*ibid.*) The specific interest of the Freudian parody in *Lolita* is therefore that it relates directly to Humbert's experience of beauty and the aesthetic in general. By viewing nympholepsy as a sexual problem, psychoanalysts misinterpret the narrator's true impulses. In addition to making clear that he is conscious of his impulses, Humbert's parody is therefore designed to demonstrate that Freudians misperceive the relation between art and sex. For a true understanding, nympholepsy must be seen as the symptom of an artistic problem. Accordingly, to set the record straight, Humbert would pause at the very moment of the novel's erotic climax (after narrating the scene at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel during which he and Lolita become lovers) to articulate his motivation as a writer: “I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets.”(*L*, 134)

to know whether the word "rapist" is tucked into "therapist" owing to accident, or in order to betray the arbitrariness of philological laws and thus our haphazard grasp of reality. It is certain, however, that by insisting upon it, Humbert Humbert draws our attention to the possibility for a reflection of a higher, undifferentiated reality, capable of accommodating contradictions such as inflicting pain and providing a cure. Whatever the reason, art is the only realm capable of conjuring forth such striking magic.<sup>293</sup>

Thus, naturally, the palette of Nabokov's descriptions is quite a rich one. He is capable of imbuing the drab world he describes with fairy-tale colors. Simultaneously, he never loses sight of the fact that every fairy tale has a dark side.<sup>294</sup> This constant duality, duplicity and juggling of the two registers serves as a constant reminder that we should never be as naïve as to trust, blindly, that everything can be rationalized and put into words. We have already seen how Humbert skillfully uses punning as a shield against his own bestial self. Yet he is, from the very beginning, distinctly aware that his romantic dream has gone terribly astray. Later on, as they spend the first night together at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, the self-appointed "guardian" will discover that Lolita has knowledge of sexual matters she has acquired first-hand: "Not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had so utterly and hopelessly depraved" (*L*, 133).

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<sup>293</sup> In the interest of fairness, we must also point out that not all of Nabokov's puns raise heady questions. We are likely to agree with those characters in his fiction who occasionally point out the fatuous ones. Even then we are sometimes skeptical, however, depending on the character: the Mann Act makes a trivial pun, but surely Humbert, of all people, is suspect for deploring it as such. What would seem trivial in the abstract often proves to be "quadrivial" (the pun is Joyce's, not Nabokov's) in dramatic context.

<sup>294</sup> The darker side emerges at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel in *Lolita*. See Phyllis Roth, "In Search of Aesthetic Bliss: A Rereading of *Lolita*" op.cit.

Wishing to impress Humbert with "the world of rough kids" (*L*, 134), Lolita somewhat unwittingly gives him what he has been craving all along – they have sex. Immediately afterwards, blended with the rapture of a dream's coming true, we clearly discern the first alarm provoked by Humbert's discovery. She is, alas, very different from what he imagined her to be. Their relationship has entered a territory he never envisioned or strived towards: "This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning. Whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all expectations, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark – and plunged into a nightmare." (*L*, 140)

The scene at the Enchanted Hunters hotel is of utmost significance for the development of the novel. It is there that Humbert really makes a choice to pursue his criminal obsession, even though he recognizes that it can only lead to his ruin. Before the initial intercourse, he could fantasize about Lolita, force her in a mold, and pretend that she replaces a long-lost object of affection – he's not hurting her directly. Or, as G. D. Josipovici puts it, Humbert's ultimate mistake lies in his attempt to "try and possess carnally what can only be possessed imaginatively."<sup>295</sup> After the night at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, he himself recognizes that his dreams can never come true:

Human beings, attend! I should have understood that Lolita had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita – the real child Lolita or some haggard angel

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<sup>295</sup> Josipovici, 46

behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture.  
(*L*, 125)

It seems to me that it is this very refusal to assess the situation in a calm and objective manner that plunges Humbert into the nightmare that follows. Far from being an artificial construction interested solely in the aesthetic side of existence, *Lolita* is, on the contrary, a novel which warns about the risks one assumes when one refuses to confront the truth about a given life circumstance and decides to act against their better judgment. As Gabriel Josipovici has remarked, Humbert's ultimate goal as a writer is to explore the implications of this nightmare and to capture "Lolita's mysterious beauty not through carnal possession but through language."<sup>296</sup> Much as in the case of the descriptions of people and places, it will be Humbert's strategy to involve the reader in the narration and make him share his sensations. Even though for the purposes of the narration Lolita appears to be a real person, in reality, she is just a symbol. We could liken her to a canvas upon which artistic sensibility can be played out. From the very moment of initial recognition and identification, Humbert denies Dolores an essence of her own. For him, she is simply a blank entity, which can be endowed with certain meaning at the will of its creator. It's worth reminding ourselves that the young girl who symbolizes a plethora of possibilities is by no means a Nabokov invention. In *Swan's Way*, Marcel Proust refers to Odette, the striking, independent and sexually appealing young woman who is in many ways reminiscent of Lolita, as extremely enticing. She is like "l'eau qui coule selon la

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<sup>296</sup> *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction*



penne que l'on lui offre.”<sup>297</sup> In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, Gilberte would be described in a similar way. The narrator would once again marvel at her ability to assume different guises according to the fancy of others: “Elle était comme un flot de matière ductile pétrie à tout moment par l'impression passagère qui les domine.”<sup>298</sup>

Much like the two Proustian heroines, in the beginning, Lolita is attractive because she incarnates an unattainable ideal. In Ramsdale, she is still the fragile, innocent nymphet, a bewitching creature who is only vaguely aware of the fantastic power she exercises over the lodger. When we meet her, it is summer, and she emerges from a mat in a pool of sun and light. Half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, she is a child. She has “frail, honey-hued shoulders,... a silky supple bare back, a chestnut head of hair, a polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hiding her juvenile breasts”. Humbert Humbert compares her to a fairy-tale princess, and with awe and delight recognizes “the tiny dark-brown mole on her side”, “her lovely indrawn abdomen ... and those puerile hips on which he sees the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts.” It is clear that she is still a little girl, but the image of Lolita in this part of the novel, in the Ramsdale house would be that of the object of romantic love which we know from classical literature. It is no accident that her character is introduced soon after the mention

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<sup>297</sup> In a scene from *Swann's Way*, Swann reproaches Odette her lack of personality. « Tu n'es même pas une personne, une créature définie, imparfaite, mais du moins perfectible. Tu es une eau informe qui coule selon la pente qu'on lui offre, un poisson sans mémoire et sans réflexion qui, tant qu'il vivra dans son aquarium, se heurtera cent fois par jour contre le vitrage qu'il continuera à prendre pour de l'eau. » (*Swann's Way*, 290) We sense the annoyance in his critique, as well as the possibility that a person like Odette incarnates. She can be molded to comply with anybody's expectations.

<sup>298</sup> *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 447

of a bevy of classic Romantic heroines such as Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laureen. Seemingly casting twelve-year-old Lolita in the traditional role of the object of romantic love, of course, allows Nabokov to juxtapose the classical image with a starkly grotesque and criminal reality. Yes, Lolita is the object of romantic infatuation, however, Humbert is not in love with her as a human being but with her as replica of the obsessive, haunting image of another little girl, Annabel, who has been dead for twenty five years. From the moment of the first encounter, Humbert starts denying Lolita her individual identity and sees her only as a reincarnation of his long-dead child-bride Annabel:

The twenty-five years I had lived since [losing Annabel] tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. In the course of the sun-shot moment that my glance slithered over the kneeling child ... the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride. ... Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them. (*L*, 40)

Lolita does not exist outside of Annabel for, as the narrator will remark at the very first page, had it not been for Annabel, there would not have been any need for Lolita. "In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child (*L*, 9). A little later, he would add, "I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel (*L*, 13-4). Maurice Couturier is right to establish a parallel between Humbert's falling in love with Lolita and Julia Kristeva's observation, in *Histoires d'amour*, that one falls in love with that which

resembles an ideal out of sight, but one which is nonetheless present in memory.<sup>299</sup> So complete has this fusion been, indeed, that, at the time of the writing of the memoir, our narrator is unable to remember Annabel clearly: “I remember her features far less distinctly today than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita (*L*, 11).<sup>300</sup>

Yet, when Humbert meets Lolita for the first time, we are presented with a conscious procedure of comparison and appraisal which has little to do with the passionate

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<sup>299</sup> The original reference, which appears in Kristeva, J. *Histoires d'amour*, p. 253, reads as follows: « On est amoureux de ce qui ressemble à un idéal hors vue mais présent au souvenir »

<sup>300</sup> In a farcical and purely Nabokovian vaudeville, Valeria and Charlotte, Humbert's wives, seem to have “cast” him in productions of their own. If Humbert imposes his expectations upon somebody and thus denies them the right to exist outside of these expectations, the same can be said about Valeria. Our attractive and attentive protagonist duly records her throwing glances at him as he plays chess with her father and “inserts eyes or knuckles borrowed from [him] into the cubistic trash that accomplished misses then painted instead of lilacs and lambs” (*L*, 25). In her late twenties, an expert liar about her age (with even her passport as accomplice), having “mislaidd” her virginity under unclear circumstances, she has chosen Humbert as the Prince Charming who would claim her from the dull existence in her father's home. Similarly, Humbert is fully cognizant of her designs to find a husband from the very moment he sets foot in her house: “I was perfectly aware that if by any chance I became her lodger, she would methodically proceed to do in regard to me what taking a lodger probably meant to her all along” (*L*, 37). Chapters 10 (first time *chez Haze*) through 17 (18 opens with a recap of the wedding) trace the evolution of Charlotte's scheme, conceived, at least initially, independently of the particular lodger-lover that chance introduces to her doorstep. *In passim*, Humbert would note that she willingly encourages, while seemingly denying, any rumors regarding an amorous relationship to the summer boarder. When she whisks Humbert away on a shopping expedition under the feeble pretext of looking for a present “for a friend of a friend of hers”, Charlotte alludes to his “wonderful taste in textures and perfumes (*L*, 50) and invites him to “choose his favorite seduction”, subsequently keeping “Humbert's choice” to use on the “backs of her own shapely ears” (*L*, 51). “What a world of love I have built up for you during this miraculous June!” (*L*, 68), she writes in the horrendous combination of cliché, tastelessness, desperation and insolence, that is her love confession (and landlady's eviction order lest her feelings be unrequited) to Humbert.

encounter we are supposed to believe in. The love for and loss of Annabel and the meeting with Lolita are the only two important events of his existence, he claims, “All I want to stress is that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that “princedom by the sea in my tortured past. Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy” (*L*, 40). And at least initially, as Humbert himself admits, part of the reason why he is so infatuated with Lolita is the fact that she is so near, so available: “the first nymphet in my life that could be reached at last by my awkward, aching, timid claws” (*L*, 56)

We somehow sense that Humbert is oscillating between two very different modulations. He is wavering between two distinct and mutually exclusive possibilities. Let us consider, for the sake of illustrating this point, Humbert's recollection of some moments of tenderness in his love for Lolita. There is no doubt that frequently, he is overwhelmed by a gentle amorousness of such force that it seems that lust may ultimately give way to love. But just as we, the readers, begin to contemplate this possibility, we are abruptly brought back to the reality of sexual passion:

I would lull and rock my lone light Lolita in my marble arms, and moan in her warm hair, and caress her at random and mutely ask her blessing, and at the peak of this human agonized selfless tenderness (with my soul actually hanging around her naked body and ready to repent), all at once, ironically, horribly, lust would swell again—and 'oh, no,' Lolita would say with a sigh to heaven, and the next moment the tenderness and the azure—all would be shattered.

At other times, the modulations are even more rapid, causing the beastly and the beautiful which appear fused in Humbert's language to become so in our minds. In another

memorable shopping expedition, in which Humbert buys Lolita pretty underwear, and fondly describes the tremendous erotic charge the trip holds for him, Humbert suddenly and unexpectedly transports the reader back to the mythical, beautiful and chaste setting of the French Riviera: “I sensed strange thoughts form in the minds of the languid ladies that escorted me from counter to counter, from rock ledge to seaweed, and the belts and the bracelets I chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water.” (*L*, 108) The beastly and the beautiful coexist in every scene in which Humbert describes his attempts to seduce Lolita. His “burning life”, his groping “tentacles” are swiftly juxtaposed against the ethereal image of “nebulous Lolita”; “mountains of longing” contrast with “mists of tenderness”; and the “haunch” of the “enchanted prey” is diametrically opposite to the “soft sand of a remote and fabulous beach”:

And less than six inches from me and my burning life, was nebulous Lolita! After a long stirless vigil, my tentacles moved towards her again, and this time the creak of the mattress did not awake her. My pillow smelled of her hair. I moved toward my glimmering darling, stopping or retreating every time I thought she stirred or was about to stir. A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics, as if the surface reflecting them were wrinkled by the phantasm of that breeze. Time and again my consciousness folded the wrong way, my shuffling body entered the sphere of sleep, shuffled out again, and once or twice I caught myself drifting into a melancholy snore. Mists of tenderness enfolded mountains of longing. Now and then it seemed to me that the enchanted prey was about to meet halfway the enchanted hunter, that her haunch was working its way toward me under the soft sand of a remote and fabulous beach; and then her dimpled dimness would stir, and I would know she was farther away from me than ever. (*L*, 98)

And finally, if we consider the structure of the novel as a whole, we notice that the greatest oscillation of tone and attitude is between the opening and the closing lines of the novel. There is a modulation from the erotic beckoning of the infamous first sentences, “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul” to the aesthetic vision of the conclusion:

And do not pity C. Q. [the murdered Clare Quilty]. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.” (*L*, 286)

Contrary to the popular interpretations which force us to choose between one or the other critical possibilities – lust or aesthetic - these contrasting and complimentary fragments prove that the states of being where art’s the norm make it possible for the two to exist simultaneously. Our sense of the text is analogous to the narrator’s sense of Lolita. In both cases, the beastly and the beautiful are combined and the “perilous magic of nymphets” – fixed. The linguistic fusion of the erotic and the aesthetic renders Humbert’s experience of beauty and allows us to make it our own.

Given Humbert's conception of beauty, we have seen that he is doomed to an infernal paradise (“a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames”). Yet to him remains the challenge of celebrating his doom by conveying to his readers his sensations of heaven and hell:

I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why? (*L*, 136)

And further, we are introduced to another modulation of the agony:

Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and faces she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise—a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames—but still a paradise. (*L*,168)

As the quote above demonstrates, part of the novel's radical novelty lies in Nabokov's skillful illustration of the breakdown of the traditional distinction between art and Eros. In a situation like this, the typical sensations of heaven and hell are no longer valid. Instead, the two become one. It is the same paradoxical coexistence of seemingly incompatible elements that Lolita incarnates. Humbert can go for pages describing her tantalizing duality. Here's just one example:

And neither is she the fragile child of a feminine novel. What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet – of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very

young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death, oh God, oh God. And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is – Lolita (*L*, 45).

We have already seen how Lolita reminds us of the prepubescent stars of the silver screen. The latter owe their fame in part to the peculiar blend of childhood innocence and feminine seduction which is so characteristic of the nymphets in Humbert's world. This is Nabokov's way of showing us that Lo is not a real person, but, to paraphrase Georges Bataille, an incarnation of that special place where the divine and the profane meet. She provokes criminal lust and is thereby doubly desirable. Possessing her would mean triumphing over two distinct, mutually exclusive and compelling realms of existence.

This highly idealized image is, of course, shattered to pieces by a sudden and horrifying realization of how human and mundane Lolita is and how mad and unrealistic the tentative to idolize her has been. Towards the end of Lolita and Humbert's cohabitation, we will arrive at a turning point of the novel, and come to share the narrator's first realization that life with Lolita, such as he has constructed it, has come to an end. Once again, we are given an opportunity to draw our own conclusions and follow Humbert's horrified gaze much like we would follow the traveling of a camera. As he observes his "aging mistress" in Beardsley, he notes the changes that have taken place:

The fog of all lust had been swept away leaving nothing but this dreadful lucidity. Oh, she had changed! Her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy high school girl who applies shared cosmetics with grubby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind



what soiled texture, what pustulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin. Its smooth tender bloom had been so lovely in former days, so bright with tears ... A coarse flush had now replaced that innocent fluorescence. ... How wrong I was. How mad I was! Everything about her was of the same exasperating impenetrable order – the strength of her shapely legs, the dirty sole of her white sock, the thick sweater she wore despite the closeness of the room, her wenchy smell, and especially the dead end of her face with its strange flush and freshly made-up lips (*L*, 204)

This series of detailed shots allows us to **see** Lolita ourselves. Rather than communicate directly the horror and the helplessness, which suddenly overwhelm him, Humbert allows us to guess it and share it through a careful selection of vocabulary. Be that as it may, what's significant is that in the movie still we are presented with, the nymphet is a creature of duality.

Humbert's attempts to describe Lolita's charm reveal that beauty is no longer associated with purity. Nymphets are characterized by their two-fold nature, which renders them simultaneously divine and infernal. Nympholepsy, the illness which Nabokov has invented for the purposes of his narrative, is thereby characterized by the dramatic breakdown of the Platonic distinction between art and Eros. But let us not forget that, as analysts, we do not inhabit the realm he is talking about. Instead, we are stuck on a plane where, as so often is the case in the modern experience of beauty, feelings of elevation go hand in hand with feelings of distress. In Humbert's case, his bliss as a nympholept is tempered by bouts with insanity, fears of being betrayed by Lolita, worries that his forbidden love may be discovered, and sensations of being followed by various agents of doom (McFate, Trapp, and Quilty). After being seduced by Lolita, Humbert

himself comes to understand that when art and Eros cease to be distinct the dream of beauty is likely to turn into a nightmare.

It is hardly a coincidence, then, that the terrible tragedy of the loss of innocence culminates in a quasi-religious experience. Five years after Lolita escapes her stepfather's claws, Humbert finds her married and pregnant in dejected Coalmont. However, it is a completely different Lolita we would encounter. Far removed from her nymphet magic, she is instead defined through the subversion of her role as wife and mother, a role which Humbert refuses to acknowledge: "I passed without touching her bulging babe," he would remark as he enters the house through the narrow hallway. This symbolic refusal to touch the child parallels the refusal to recognize that she has changed. Yet it is in the Coalmont house that a small detail would nonetheless let us realize that Humbert is aware of the pain and suffering he has inflicted upon his beloved. For a brief moment, he compares her to Christ on the cross:

Couple of inches taller. Pink-rimmed glasses. New, heaped-up hairdo, new ears. ... She was frankly and hugely pregnant. Her head looked smaller, and her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers. ... Against the splintery deadwood of the door, Dolly Schiller flattened herself as best she could (even rising on tiptoe a little) to let me pass, and was crucified for a moment, looking down, smiling down at the threshold, hollow-cheeked with round *pommettes*, her watered-milk-white arms outspread on the wood. ... Dolly-smell, with a faint fried addition. (*L*, 198)

This anti-climactic, anti-romantic description of Lolita as an ordinary housewife is in stark contrast with her images as a bewitching nymphet or apprentice tramp Humbert had imposed upon the reader in the previous two homes, yet much in keeping with the general narrative strategy of reducing her to one easily identifiable literary and gender cliché. The domestic space in Coalmont has one very important function as far as our understanding of *Lolita* (the novel) as a larger societal phenomenon. Dolores the housewife exposes the allegories of Lolita for the false myths they are and disturbs simple distinctions between "deviant" and "normal" sexual behavior. I'd like to argue that the picture of homely domesticity in the new Schiller household is much more unsettling to Humbert and the reader than any previous role she has been cast in. Instead of reaping the ruin of the fallen, deviant woman, she is leading a stereotypically "decent" life. Nabokov not only challenges Humbert's understanding of Lolita's deviant identity, but also interrogates myths about spotless, "normal," married women at-large.

It is clear, then, that language in Nabokov's fiction is the medium of life. It underscores the illusory patterns our time-bound, literal consciousness imposes upon human existence. It operates as a metaphor for the coincidental deceptive forms that comprise the material universe. It stands as proof that, far from being closed or merely self-reflexive, Nabokov's world – the realm in which art is the norm, is a dexterous, playful yet sinister reflection of the phenomenal world. As Ralph Ciancio would point out,

the terrible beauty of his art is that the two worlds share the sheen of the void, which Nabokov's language makes visible and audible at the plane of their contiguity-words and phrases jolted loose from their rational foundations and whirling in chaos-and which holds the two worlds together, just as Humbert's nonsensical chant, the spell of his

garbling, holds together the scene in which he "solipsizes" Lolita. ... He can ultimately transcend the grotesque because, from the beginning, he doffs the identities of his characters from behind the mask of language while maintaining consciousness of himself as their aloof and integral creator. Either that or, as in *Lolita*, his vision and the transformation of his characters from grotesques to whole human beings evolve simultaneously.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Ciancio, 534

#### IV.

In conclusion, I'd like to evoke a detail, frequently overlooked in *Lolita* criticism: Upon leaving the Coalmont house and saying goodbye to his "immortal love" forever, Humbert would hand her an envelope with her share from the sale of her late mother's estate. This brief but heart wrenching and deeply problematic scene manages to incorporate, in kaleidoscopic fashion, all the bits of the puzzle that is *Lolita*: the innocent maiden, the corrupted teenager, the object of sexual fantasy, the focal point of romantic love, the quintessential matter-of-fact young whore, the suburban housewife but above all, the brave young woman, cashing in on years of abuse and the sale of her childhood home.

The reader who limits the interpretation of *Lolita* to one of the two narrative paradigms of interpretations seems to me to be missing the greater narrative picture, of which the detail above is a good example. Much more so than any contemporary novel, the book succeeds in constructing a completely original alternative, yet comprehensive realm of existence, one in which art is the norm and not a consciously explored option. The most fascinating aspect of Nabokov's prose lies in his having anticipated the interpretative difficulties which would accompany the novel decades after its publication. In his typical teasing fashion, he has left us with a powerful image which somewhat captures the contemporary attitude which so amused him. When asked how he came up with the inspiration for the novel, the writer referred his interviewer to the newspaper account of the ape in the Jardin des Plantes, the inspirational source of *Lolita*: "After months of coaxing by a scientist," the ape "produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by

an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage."<sup>302</sup> It seems to me that he was trying to warn is that we, too, resemble the ape. For all the coaxing the narrative has done to lure us into an alternative space, all we see are the bars and limitations of our own moral and aesthetic *a priori*.

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<sup>302</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Afterword to *Lolita*, p. 313

# Realities of Addiction

William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1962)

Reality is a question  
Of realizing how real  
The world is already

Allen Ginsberg

## I.

William Seward Burroughs was born in 1914, in St Louis, Missouri. T.S. Eliot, another famous denizen, had already put the city on the literary map (1). T.S. Eliot had been very fond of his St. Louis childhood. Whenever he went back to it, he would fondly remember the majestic moods of the Mississippi, the steamboats blowing in the New Year, the floods with their floating cargo of dead Negroes and chicken coops, the waters tame and sluggish in the summer. "I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river which is incommunicable to those who have not," he wrote.<sup>303</sup> He was convinced that having lived on the banks of the Mississippi changed one forever. Burroughs did not think so. He never mentioned it in his writings. To read him, one would think that the only river that flowed through St Louis was a small creek by the name of Rivière des Pères, an open sewer thirty feet across. It meandered through the city and emptied into the Mississippi. Strangely enough, it flowed through some of the

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<sup>303</sup> Quoted by Moody, op.cit., 4

wealthier neighborhoods of the city. It was a powerful symbol of striking effluence amid the affluence.<sup>304</sup> It was a powerful symbol of the ways in which the low and the lofty come together, and proved a lasting fascination for the budding writer.

Even though Burroughs and Eliot seem to have grown up in two different “versions” of St. Louis, they nonetheless had some things in common. They were both true poets of their time. “The experience of each new age requires a new confession and the world seems always waiting for its poet”, Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaims in “The Poet.”<sup>305</sup> The sentence applies as much to Eliot as it does to Burroughs. Ted Morgan calls them “litmus people.”<sup>306</sup> He compares them to the pieces of paper which record the tiniest changes, produced by chemical reactions. Similarly, the two authors registered the concerns and preoccupations of their own day and age. In their writing, they shored up fragments of civilization. They seemed to live under the shadow of an imminent catastrophe. They felt that every fragment – the ugly, the ordinary, the disturbing, the crass – was worth saving, and incorporated them in their writings.

The catastrophe arrived, eventually. The differences in Eliot and Burroughs’ literary heritage is symbolic of the rift caused by World War Two and its aftermath. Eliot was the pre-Atomic Bomb. His *Waste Land* reads like an inventory of mementoes buried in a time capsule. He wanted to save them for the future generations. Burroughs, on the other hand, was a post-Bomb writer. His writing is entirely immersed in a radically novel present, full of mad scientists, deranged addicts and science fictional practices. He was describing the effects of what he believed was America’s Faustian pact to sell its soul for

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<sup>304</sup> Morgan, 29

<sup>305</sup> Emerson, “The Poet.” In Axelrod, et.al., op. cit., 205

<sup>306</sup> Morgan, 55



power, and lose its innocence.<sup>307</sup> He felt a crushing nostalgia for America Before the Bomb. It had been a safe and protected place, going its own way, pursuing its own dream. After the Bomb, it was a hostile, mad, paranoiac circus, in which no perversion was excluded and no addiction – unknown. This is what Burroughs aims at describing. He occasionally juxtaposes it to the way the country was, but there us no trace of Eliot’s delicate sentimentality towards the past.<sup>308</sup>

Ann Morrisett gives us one of the most fascinating and succinct biographical accounts of William Burroughs’ life. It is significant because it provides us with the essential facts about his life in the most straightforward of manners. It also contains no small dose of the typical dry and self-deprecating Burroughs humor. It allows us to see through his eyes how he evaluated his life experiences. In the wonderfully quirky, almost poetic article titled “An Account of the Events Preceding the Death of Bill Burroughs”,

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<sup>307</sup> The radical novelty of Burroughs’ prose had been appreciated relatively early on. In "The New Mutants," a talk given in a symposium on the idea of the future held at Rutgers in June 1965, Leslie Fiedler directed his audience's attention to “the radical transformation (under the impact of advanced technology) of Homo sapiens into something else.” He spoke of the emergence of 'mutants' among us" (Fiedler, op. cit, 382). The talk traced the relays between contemporary literary practice and the vertiginous social transformations of the moment. These were identified as the steady disaffection of youth, the movement toward greater sexual freedom, the emergence of a more oppositional gay consciousness, the increased visibility of an American drug culture, and the revaluation of the concept of mental illness. Fiedler singled Burroughs out from a number of writers as the “chief prophet” (Fiedler, 392) of a vision of the future. He pointed out that *Naked Lunch*, which articulated these concerns, was “no mere essay in heroin-hallucinated homosexual pornography-but a nightmare anticipation (in Science Fiction form) of post-Humanist sexuality.” (Fiedler, 395)

<sup>308</sup> In a New York restaurant once, asked what he wanted to order, Burroughs replied, “A bass fished in Lake Huron in 1920.” (Morgan, 55)

Morrissett describes having given him “a questionnaire” at their meeting in the early 1960s:

It would be simpler if you fill out this questionnaire, I say, handing him my hand. On its lines he traces perfunctorily: Born 1914 of Burroughs Adding Machines. Boarding school in Los Alamos where now they make bombs. Harvard. Advertising in New York. Mother one of thirteen children of a minister: most of them in public relations and advertising. Uncle Ivy Lee did PR for John D. Rockefeller, handing out the dimes. In the army for four months, discharged as psychologically incompatible. No conscientious scruples, just didn't suit me. OK for those who like it, inefficient for modern warfare. Back to odd jobs in New York. Junk a matter of association. On it ten years. Psychological approach bunk. Only apomorphine cures. Wife never on it. Like Mexico: wife accident. Son 14, with grandparents in Florida. Never remarry. Like living alone. Conventional brother still in St. Louis. Never go back. Midwest a wasteland. Would like to go to the Far East. Have no base, but of much of a voyager. Tangiers OK but had enough. New York awful.<sup>309</sup>

Those staccato lines give us the essential truths we must know about William Burroughs. They are also written in a style, remarkably close to Burroughs' own. The latter is a collage of curt phrases, often carried out in a decidedly “non-literary” fashion. It was always moving, always poignant and provoking an almost visceral reaction on the part of the reader.

The following study attempts to look at William Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* (1962), and explore the ways in which this sometimes highly disturbing work of art constitutes, in its own way, a celebration of life. It starts off with an analysis of a theme which is prevalent in the novel – that of addiction. It is important to bear in mind that

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<sup>309</sup> Morrissett, op. cit., 7

here, addiction means much more than simply having a drug habit. My study explores the multitude of forms it takes in the text. Next, we will look at the purely literary aspects of the narrative. We will explore the reasoning behind the novel's highly controversial and idiosyncratic language. In conclusion, I'd like to argue that *Naked Lunch* constructs its own religious and moral universe, characterized by extreme lucidity and objectivity with regards to the human condition.

## II.

Much has been made of Burroughs' drug addiction. Justifiably so, for it finds itself at the core of his earlier novels. The latter can, in many ways, be interpreted as "drug" accounts. Asked to testify in the *Naked Lunch* obscenity trial, writer Norman Mailer pointed out that, while Burroughs' talent was undoubtedly excited and inflamed by his drug habit, it was also very much hurt by it. Had he not had to deal with the consequences of addiction, Mailer argued, Burroughs could have been one of the greatest geniuses of the English language.<sup>310</sup> This assessment seems as well-intentioned as it is misguided. Burroughs himself never attempted to justify his addiction. He would most certainly have been disgusted by attempts to chalk it off to some obscure desire for exploration. On the contrary, he always specified that, in his case, addiction and writing went hand in hand: "I think [drugs] were a very important experience, and [they] really got me started on writing. I don't know what I would have written without [them]"<sup>311</sup>.

Part of the reason why drugs were inseparable from writing for Burroughs is a simple fact of practical nature. He only wrote in moments of partial or total withdrawal. These periods under the influence are characterized by a heightened sensitivity. The drugs cause the old subjectivity to dwindle and in the process, the addict is set free from the constraints of his conditioned personality. As a result, he experiences a series of perceptions, feelings, fleeting disjointed impressions and psychic and sensory stimuli. The overwhelming accumulation of sensations has been aptly described in *Naked Lunch*: the

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<sup>310</sup> Excerpts from the Boston trial reprinted in *Naked Lunch*, xvi-xvii

<sup>311</sup> Interview with Philippe Mikriamos, 1974: 15

narrator claims that this “barrage of sensations external and visceral” (*NL*, xii, 218-19)<sup>312</sup> is likewise extremely painful. In an interview for the *Paris Review*, Burroughs would elaborate further on the specificities of the experience:

[The addict] is acutely aware of his surroundings. Sense impression are sharpened to the point of hallucination. Familiar objects seem to stir wit a writhing furtive life. The addict is subject to a barrage of sensations external and visceral. He may experience flashes of beauty and nostalgia, but the overall impression is extremely painful – (Possibly his sensations are painful because of their intensity. A pleasurable sensation may become intolerable after a certain intensity is reached.<sup>313</sup>

In moments like this, the writer transforms into a duct. He becomes a recording device which transcribes the mind’s wanderings on paper, all the while maintaining the haphazard order in which the events occur in his head. This process is far from pleasant. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs states, “Writing is more painful than anything I ever did. Parentheses pounce on me and tear me apart. I have no control over what I write, which is as it should be.”<sup>314</sup> The creative process is comparable to the acute suffering caused by the physical abstinence from drugs. Working on the novel all day causes “an almost unbearable pain,” and working on the novel all day “[is] terribly painful.”<sup>315</sup> Burroughs flatly declares that he is “no entertainer.” He thinks of himself as a

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<sup>312</sup> All References to the text of *Naked Lunch* come from the 2001 Grove Press edition, op. cit.

<sup>313</sup> ‘William Burroughs: An Interview’, *Paris Review* 35, 1965

<sup>314</sup> Burroughs, *Letters of William S. Burroughs*, 289

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 285, 287

“recording instrument”, which “absorb[s] the medium” (*NL*, 61).<sup>316</sup> It is clear that a man writing in a state of sharp pain is not an objective source of information about the reality he is depicting. Thus, the rendition of his surroundings on paper are characterized by a blurring of the distinctions between subjective and objective and participant and observer.

Burroughs confesses that he never found anything of great value in what lies beyond human nature – e.g. the environment, and focused instead on the individual, often drawing examples from his own life experiences. It is clear that, in his writing, there is a clear-cut parallel between addiction and the creative act.<sup>317</sup> Writing serves a two-fold purpose. It is both a withdrawal from the addiction and an opportunity to confront it directly. Drugs are portrayed as the enemy. The drug users are reduced parasitic beings, driven and blinded by the habit which gnaws away at them from within.<sup>318</sup> Writing allows the author to visualize the beast. Seeing it, in turn, leads to a desire to seek a

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<sup>316</sup> Multiple biographers have marveled at Burroughs’ ability to blend completely with his surroundings. Always dressed in a three-piece suit and a hat, he cut a rather nondescript figure. In 1954, he had moved to Tangiers and started composing *Naked Lunch*. The locals knew him as “El Hombre Invisible.”(For a thorough exploration of Burroughs’ unassuming appearance and nondescript behavior, see Miles, Barry. *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible: A Portrait*. 1st ed. New York: Hyperion, 1993).

<sup>317</sup> What’s more, he seems to also have a rather clear idea of what drugs are conducive to the artistic experience and what constitute a mere distraction. Writes Marshall McLuhan, “He rejects the hallucinatory drugs as providing mere ‘content’, fantasies, dreams, that money can buy. Junk (heroin) is need to turn the human body itself into an environment that includes the universe. ... whether a man takes the road of junk or the road of art, the entire world must submit to his processing. The world becomes his ‘content’. He programs the sensory order.” (In “Notes on Burroughs”, *The Nation*, December 28, 1964

<sup>318</sup> Ted Morgan calls Burroughs’ addiction “a parasite” thereby drawing a parallel with the writer’s obsession with viruses. For more details, see Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 51. We will be discussing Burroughs’ obsession with viruses in greater detail in the section devoted to language.

remedy: “The only thing to do with junk sickness, like pain, is to plunge right in the middle of it,” Burroughs would insist. He emphasized constantly the importance of confronting reality and trying to understand it *as is*. Fascinatingly, he was never in denial of his own dependency. For example, on the topic of the apomorphine cure, the only type of therapy which helped him with his habit, he claimed that its greatest merit lied in the fact that it allowed one to confront the problem of dependency: “When you take apomorphine for a severe emotional state you *have faced the problem not avoided it.*”<sup>319</sup> The exploration of pain is tantamount to a study of human nature. Burroughs viewed himself as having embarked upon a lifelong observation of every facet of human experience. He was determined to expose existence in its most brutal and extreme human form.

Enter the Junkie, Burroughs’ permanent protagonist. Much like Louis-Ferdinand Céline, for whom he had a great deal of respect, and Kerouac and Ginsberg, the other two great authors of the Beat Generation he remained in dialogue with throughout his career, Burroughs was interested in the Everyman of his generation and his circumstances. As we have noted previously, he depicted the “addict of the streets,” a person who successfully embodied the experiences of many more like himself. He drew largely on his own perceptions.<sup>320</sup> But if Burroughs was interested in the average addict, it was also because through him, he could investigate better the ways of a society of which this addict was symptomatic. If we wish to understand the junk pyramid, Burroughs insisted,

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<sup>319</sup> *The Job*, 82. Emphasis mine

<sup>320</sup> In a perhaps slightly exaggerated and romanticized account of William Burroughs’ attitude towards addiction, critic John Lardas would go as far as to claim that “As an addict, he voluntarily submitted to an exaggerated version of Faustian Civilization to learn how to escape its grasp.” (Lardas, 152)

we must start at the bottom. It is the addict in the street “who must have junk to live” that constitutes “the one irreplaceable factor in the junk equation.” (*NL*, 202)

Burroughs did not start writing until later in life<sup>321</sup> when he had already developed a habit. However, his interest in those who experimented with drugs and wrote under their influence dates back to his college days at Harvard. One course that had a profound influence on him was on Coleridge. It was taught by John Livingston Lowes, the author of *The Road to Xanadu*, one of the most comprehensive studies on the genesis of Coleridge’s work. Lowes’ study is likewise one of the first books to establish a connection between drugs and creativity in more general terms. Most of Coleridge’s poems, Lowes argues, with the possible exception of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, had been composed under the influence of opium.<sup>322</sup> He analyzed them as *de facto* opium visions.<sup>323</sup> He was also the one who first turned Burroughs on to the writings of De Quincey. The latter’s words about his opium addiction apply perfectly to Burroughs’ situation as a drug addict and the worldview it inspired: “Opium gives and takes away. It defeats the steady habit of exertion. It ruins the natural power of life. But it develops preternatural paroxysms of intermitting power.”<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> The bulk of Burroughs’ writing was produced after the mid-1960s, when he moved to London and took the apomorphine cure.

<sup>322</sup> Lowes, op. cit., 414, 418. Lowes goes on to comment and qualify these claims.

<sup>323</sup> See *The Road to Xanadu*, by John Livingstone Lowes, op.cit. The Ancient Mariner may not have been dreamt of under the influence of opium, however, he becomes an important figure in *Naked Lunch*. In the speech which mockingly justifies his desire to write the novel, the speaker-narrator would evoke him: “Gentle reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner. Oh Christ what a scene is this! Can tongue or pen accommodate these scandals?” (*NL*, 40).

<sup>324</sup> Cooke, 39



According to Ted Morgan, one of Burroughs' most trustworthy biographers, his fascination with the Romantic poets and De Quincey was one of the reasons why the author of *Naked Lunch* was almost meticulous about developing an addiction. It would appear as though he became a junkie in a highly conscious manner.<sup>325</sup> There is no telling whether he was attracted by the image of the addict as a disreputable, shabby, compulsive wanderer carrying his mysterious and holy wound perpetrated by the Romantic imagination.<sup>326</sup> However, I strongly doubt that Burroughs' fascination with the Romantic ideal was so strong. The junkies, as they are portrayed in *Naked Lunch*, bear very little resemblance to their archetypal Romantic era counterparts. Even though, in accordance with the Romantic tradition, they are visionaries belonging to a closed and secret order, they are nonetheless stripped of any Romantic-inspired character embellishments. The

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<sup>325</sup> The last statement sounds too much like a part of the common legend which always, one way or another, surrounds the persona of a famous writer. Yet it is true that William Burroughs did not start experimenting with drugs out of naiveté, ignorance, peer pressure or sheer boredom as is the case with many more conventional addicts. He turned to drugs because he sincerely saw in them a viable alternative to life as it is experienced by most people. His comfortable middle-class surroundings struck him as confining and stultifying. He was never a man of mainstream radical ideas (he felt that there was no use in "substituting one establishment for another.") As a result, as Jenni Skerl puts it, perhaps a tad bit oversimplified,

The years of wandering constituted a long apprenticeship to his vocation as a writer, which paralleled his search for a belief to provide the basis for his life. That quest found its end in 1941 when Burroughs became a morphine addict. The life-style and values of the addict fulfilled Burroughs' yearning to identify himself with an outlaw group of men whose every daily action was an affront to the bourgeois social order. Furthermore, addiction ended dilettantism and gave a prophetic vision that enabled Burroughs to turn his life into art" (Skerl, 7).

<sup>326</sup> The Nineteenth century *junkie* is a figure first incarnated in the alcoholic Burns and the mad Chatterton.

strange and disgusting characters called Sollubi in *Naked Lunch* are a permutation of this archetype:

The Sollubi are an untouchable caste in Arabia noted for their abject vileness. De luxe cafés are equipped with Sollubi who rim the guests while they eat – holes in the seating benches being provided for this purpose. Citizens who want to be utterly humiliated and degraded – so many people do, nowadays, hoping to jump the gun, offer themselves for passive homosexual intercourse to an encampment of Sollubis. ... Nothing like it, they tell me ... In fact, the Sollubi are subject to become wealthy and arrogant and lose their native vileness. What is origin of untouchable?? Perhaps a fallen priest caste. In fact, untouchables perform a priestly function in taking on themselves all human vileness. (*NL*, 99)

Similarly, Burroughs would modify beyond recognition the image of Coleridge, who we find at the heart of the novel. The great Romantic poet appears in the guise of a mad, inarticulate scholar. It is a striking, distorted, aphasiac portrait. Still, he is also one of the great sages of the novel. His lecture on the pus of Interzone University embodies the stylistic matrix of the whole book:

Consider the Ancient Mariner without curare, lasso, bilbocapnine or straitjacket, albeit able to capture and hold a live audience. ... What is his hurmp gimmick? He he he he . ... He does not, like so-called artists at this time, stop just *anybody* thereby inflicting unsent-for boredom and working random hardship. ... He stops those who cannot choose but hear owing to already existing relation between The Mariner (however ancient) and the uh Wedding Guest. ... (*NL*, 73)

The Ancient Mariner's plight arises from his inability to find the appropriate language, in which he can relate his experience in an adequate manner. He has been condemned to telling his tale *ad infinitum, in exilio*. Similarly, while reading *Naked Lunch*, we experience the effects of deliberately reduced linguistic power and the narrator's inability to express himself. The whole novel can be described as a desperate attempt to tell the tale truly once for all, and so be rid of it. *Naked Lunch* has sometimes been interpreted as the journal of a cure. It seems to me that it would be more appropriate to call it the cure itself.<sup>327</sup> In putting the experience into words, the narrator is able to possess his demons. Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the novelistic form, based on the assembly of fragments, allows one to exert greater narrative control and make sense of reality better.

It is important to remind ourselves that the main theme of *Naked Lunch* is addiction, but that we should not reduce the notion to merely having a drug habit. Burroughs was obsessed with all types of attempts to and means of controlling the body and the mind. If he uses the metaphor of junk, it is because it supplies an appropriate analogy with the human condition in general. Junk weakens the body and renders it more vulnerable to manipulation. But drugs are not always bought and sold on the street and dependency on them is not always of the physical kind. Let us briefly consider the other types of addiction Burroughs focuses on throughout his novel.

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<sup>327</sup> This type of "talking cure" is not a figment of Burroughs' imagination. As a matter of fact, it makes a striking fictive anticipation of a method for curing addiction. The latter was used by an organization called Synanon in rehabilitating addicts. For more information, see Frank D. McConnell, "William Burroughs and the Literature of Addiction", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol 8. No 4 (Autumn, 1967), pp 665-680

William Burroughs the post-Bomb writer is a man, profoundly immersed in the Capitalist frame of mind and mode of operation, characteristic of the decades after the 1930s. Born into a fairly well-off family, he was nonetheless acutely aware of the inhuman aspects of this economic framework. His novels explored a sinister reality, provoked by mankind's insatiable hunger for money and goods. Burroughs saw commercial objects as intruders, slowly wiggling themselves into our lives and taking control of them. This notion is, to be sure, anything but a novel one. Karl Marx was the first thinker to reflect upon the bizarre and unhealthy relationship between humans and inanimate objects. He refers to this phenomenon as "commodity fetishism." In *The Capital*, Marx described a process whereby possessive individualism enslaves the subjectivity by forcing it to worship objects and desire goods. Marx explains how the novel modes of manufacturing goods led people to produce fragments of an object on an assembly line. Thus, they become alienated from the product of their work and as a consequence, they begin to ascribe agency to it. This elevated the status of the object from something which was strictly utilitarian to an object of desire.

William Burroughs was of course no Marxist, yet *Naked Lunch* displays many similarities with Marx's materialist critique. They are particularly striking if we take a look at *Naked Lunch's* insight into how ordinary objects, when commodified, acquire "phantom objectivity." As objects of desire, they acquire a transcendental character beyond the immediate grasp of the senses. As Timothy S. Murphy points out, *Naked Lunch* constitutes an exacting critique both of the social organization of late capital and "the logic of representation or textuality that abets it."<sup>328</sup> The text is full of references to

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<sup>328</sup> Murphy, *Wising up the Marks*, 74-76

the ways in which ordinary objects have taken over human life. In a particularly poignant (and hilarious) scene, we see an American housewife who discovers that the kitchen appliances she once lusted after have turned into monsters who are chasing her around the house: “The Garbage Disposal Unit snapping at me, and the nasty old Mixmaster keep trying to get up under my dress.” (*NL*, 112)

As the example above illustrates, addiction to objects is treated as no less serious problem than addiction to junk.<sup>329</sup> Consumer Society is therefore one of the primary targets in *Naked Lunch*. Examples of mankind’s obsession with commodities and commodity fetishism abound. Burroughs sees the postwar individual enmeshed in a capitalist mythology, and attempts to decipher the words and images which make one so susceptible to its charms. He is also wise to the fact that, regardless of how much one owns, if one is entrapped by the Capitalist system of desire, one would never be satisfied, thus perpetuating the manipulation.<sup>330</sup> According to the paradigm depicted in *Naked Lunch*, the individual lives in a state of constant anxiety, because he is prisoner to his own desires. Every facet of human existence is part of an intricate market system. Much like T.S. Eliot, Burroughs would depict his own version of the Waste Land:

Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants grow out of genitals, vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of the body) across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to

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<sup>329</sup> On a purely linguistic level, the fact that the slang word “junk” means both a drug and the assembly of unnecessary objects of no real value is particularly delectable,

<sup>330</sup> Derived from the Portuguese *feico*, “that which is made in order to make,” the word fetishism immediately evokes the notion of a vicious circle on the linguistic level.

Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market. (NL, 92)

Drugs are, of course, not exempt from the system of commodities. They are a product much like anything else. What's more, they have been around longer than Capitalism. Their appeal lies in their capacity to provide something even more powerful and therefore addictive – a sense of complete detachment from reality. Thomas De Quincey, remembering the mysterious and celestial-seeming druggist who sold him his first tincture of opium, gives us an apt description:

Here was the secret of happiness about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, a once discovered; happiness might now be bought for a penny and carried in the waistcoat pocket; portable ecstasies might be had corked up in a pint bottle; and peace of mind could be sent down in gallons by the mail coach.<sup>331</sup>

Similarly, in *Naked Lunch*, junk will be portrayed as the ideal product, the ultimate merchandise:

Junk is the mould of monopoly and possession ... No sales talk is necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy ... The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client. He pays his staff in junk. Junk yields the basic formula of "evil" virus: *The Algebra of Need*. The face of "evil" is always the face of total need. (NL, 200)

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<sup>331</sup> De Quincey, op. cit., 44

What the novel attempts to expose is the brutal nature of the cash-and-carry culture which has made the junkie a reality. Everybody is a junkie, everybody finds himself at the mercy of con men, “marks”, connections, regulators and their legitimate counterparts – doctors, physicians, psychiatrists, policemen, customs officials, regulators of every shape and form. The whole world economy depends on the ability to sell the goods to the consumer. And since everything is marketed for sale, misrepresentation of the product is a common occurrence. The lies which accompany the process of selling are something Burroughs would like to distance himself from. He counters them by launching an exploration of reality in an honest and unembellished of manners. Always anxious to avoid allegorizing, Burroughs tells us what the meaning of the naked lunch of his title *is*. The notion of the Naked Lunch,<sup>332</sup> a relatively brief instance of great significance, would assume quasi-mythical proportions in Burroughs’ writing. It is “that frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.” (*NL*, 199) It is, then, a moment of perfect lucidity and recognition. What’s more, the system of selling and procuring the drug is no less sophisticated than the most sophisticated financial markets. Writes Burroughs,

I have seen the exact manner in which the junk virus operates through fifteen years of addiction. The pyramid of junk, one level eating the level below (it is no accident that junk higher ups are always fat and the addict in the street is always thin) right up to the top or tops since there are many junk pyramids feeding on peoples of the world and all built on basic principles of monopoly:

1- Never give anything away for nothing.

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<sup>332</sup> The irony becomes deeper if we consider the similarity of the title to the popular American adage, “There is no such thing as free lunch.” The saying essentially means that, despite appearances, nothing in life is free. Everything has a price tag, and everything will be paid for at one point or another.

2-Never give away more than you have to give (always catch the buyer hungry and always make him wait).

3-Always take everything back if you possibly can. The Pusher always gets it all back. The addict needs more and more junk to maintain a human form . . . buy off the Monkey. Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession. (*NL*, 200)

So far, we have elucidated two forms of addiction as portrayed in *Naked Lunch*. Physical dependency and commodity fetishism are joined by a third, no less rampant and equally disturbing condition: addiction to sex. Sex is virtually dominant in the world of *Naked Lunch*. In an article, written several years after the novel's publication, R. G. Peterson observes that Burroughs' sex "is the sex that Freud, Lawrence, and the marriage manual have revealed as ultimate cause, means, and end. [...] Anything goes in Freeland, Interzone, or New York: sex is there, in all the glorious varieties its expression can take. No version or perversion is un-represented, and, in the universal search for sexual gratification, the very distinction between man and woman disappears."<sup>333</sup> Lust transforms men and women into grotesque animals and plants and, at last, into masses of tissue or blobs of protoplasm.

Sexual intercourse remains, thus, one of Burroughs' *bêtes noires*. Disturbing descriptions of the sex act are ubiquitous in the book and have accounted in no small measure for the obscenity charges made against it at the time of its publication. The human body, its functions and desires are related in descriptions, which shock us with their stark physicality. The intercourse itself is always reduced to a mindless, mechanical response to a pure necessity. The desire for sex is, much like the desire for junk, pure

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<sup>333</sup> Peterson, 86



uncontrollable need. When it needs to be satisfied, it takes over the functions of the whole body. The language of the descriptions is poignant. The words are striking as much for their shock value as for the accuracy of the description they provide.

The similarities between the *junkie* and the sex addict are reinforced through the frequent images of the two open, gaping organs of need we encounter on the pages of the novel, the mouth and the asshole. The *junkie* is characterized by his “blind, seeking mouth,” which “sways out on a long tube of ectoplasm, feeling for the silent frequency of junk” (*NL*, 7). The sex addict appears to seek blindly the same emotional biological “kick” as his drug-addicted counterpart:

He's got a prolapsed asshole and when he wants to get screwed he'll pass you his ass on three feet of in-tes-tine ... If he's a mind to it he can drop out a piece of gut reaches from his office clear over to Roy's Beer lace, and it go feelin' around lookin' for a peter, just afeelin' around like a blind worm” (*NL*, 105-106).

And what's more, both of these fascinating and inhuman creatures, the drug and the sex addict, walk the thin line between life and death. It is not infrequent that engaging in extreme sexual practices result in death, much like it would in an overdose on drugs. *Naked Lunch* is strewn by bodies left behind from acts of murder-while-engaged-in-a-sex. Those are a permanent fixture in the Burroughs image gallery. Almost all major novels contain at least one such scene. In *Naked Lunch*, fir example, we will see a boy executed by means of a gallows set up on an Aztec mosaic platform. The description of the disturbing ceremony is strangely reminiscent of Genet, for it, too, is driven by the desire to desecrate a religious practice. Another disturbing scene will take place in

Hassan's Rumpus Room, the grotesque parody of a rich café society haunt. In the Rumpus Room, we would experience similar stylized Aztec rituals of sensual cruelty. Similarly to Genet's *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*, such scenes are usually highly ornamental and orchestrated to the most minute detail. In the two aforementioned ones, for example, the victim's dead ejaculations and snapping neck are coordinated with the rising of the sun. Such coincidences, clearly inspired by the archaic fertility rites practiced in a number of cultures, and which necessitated a human sacrifice in order to appease the gods. Much like Georges Bataille, Burroughs recognized that the erotic act of killing constituted the most extreme representative act of the human world. By committing murder, one achieved the most significant transgression, for human life is sacred in every culture. In committing such a crime, the killer places himself above and beyond human laws, and stakes a claim to inhuman power.

Burroughs was well aware of the relationship existing between the act of murder during intercourse, and the affirmation of individual autonomy it symbolized. While capital punishment is legalized killing, anesthetized by all the verbiage which the legal system can generate, murdering someone while having intercourse with them is brutal, primordial and therefore extremely tantalizing. *Naked Lunch* contains a number of scenes in which the descriptions are carried out realistically. The intent is a full-on assault on the erotic nature of power as a representative of the orgasmic experience. The pleasure-pain, tension-relief contrasts point out to yet another important aspect. The convulsions of the victim fighting for its life liberates a great deal of energy, and rejuvenates and invigorates the onlookers: "The copulating rhythm of the universe flows through the room, a great

blue tide of life”, Burroughs would write.<sup>334</sup> Thus, the ritualistic killing of the sexual object is yet another form of addiction – this time to the power and sense of transgression inherent in the act.

The gravity of all three aforementioned conditions, however, pales in comparison to what Burroughs would attack most vehemently in the course of his writing career, namely, his countrymen’s dependency on ideals and conventional morality. In the writer’s eyes, America is all too attached to meaningless myths. He believes that its population adheres to pre-fabricated ideals in order to spare themselves the need to think. Since writing the parody “Twilight’s Last Gleaming” in 1938, Burroughs continually questioned the terms of American mythos. He was constantly testing the ideals inherited by postwar Americans against insights he had gleaned from various parts of the underworld and junkie havens. The basic “fact” he learned was that “junk” was “a prototype of invasion. That is, “junk replaces the user’s cells until he, the user, *is* junk”. Seeing drug addiction as a microcosm of “life, pleasure and human purpose,” he concluded that “morality (at this point an unqualified evil), ethics, philosophy, religion, can no longer maintain an existence separate from the facts of physiology.”<sup>335</sup> Consequently, morality had to be re-invented and brought closer to humanity.

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<sup>334</sup> Ever interested in the possibilities of expanding the consciousness and going beyond the constraints of conventional existence as it is experienced by most people, Burroughs also speculated that death in orgasm has the potential of making possible the living of other lives. He muses upon that possibility in *The Job*: “Perhaps a person dies in the orgasm in which he is born – he dies into his own conception, as it were; and that would be the continuity involved. Freud referred to the orgasm as *la petit mort* – “the little death”. It is a moment of unconsciousness, in some cases, that approximates some of the manifestations of death”. (*The Job*, 154)

<sup>335</sup> Burroughs, “Ginsberg Notes”, 123

As we will see in the following section, Burroughs would hold the English language responsible for enabling America to exculpate itself through a de-valuation and vulgarization of all that is sacred and meaningful. As Robin Lydenberg points out in “Beyond Good and Evil: How to Read *Naked Lunch*”, “Burroughs’ project in the novel is to cure the ‘image addiction’ and ‘morality addiction’ of Western thought by producing a text which will defy and destroy these systems”.<sup>336</sup> The “virus of addiction”, as Burroughs refers to it, comes in many forms. But most importantly, and most problematically, America suffers from “addiction to rightness, to being in the right,” as well as a penchant for insisting upon these two categories.<sup>337</sup> He was worried that this Manichean opposition reduced one’s life choices to only two options, right or wrong. The arbitrariness of these two categories is obvious to Burroughs, since the individual has no control over the ways in which these categories are formulated and distinguished from one another. Human beings are manipulated through a rhetoric of shame and indignation. The addiction to “moral dualism” is reinforced through the evocation of sentiments of guilt and disgust. The general public’s attachment to this dualism is both aggressive and unyielding. In *Naked Lunch*, the consequences have been depicted in their most extreme. There, everyone who is thought of as being in the wrong, is executed: “Senators leap up and bray for the Death Penalty with inflexible authority of virus yen ... Death for dope fiends, death for sex queens (I mean fiends), death for the psychopath” (*NL*, 223).

Convinced of the inherent vileness of this dual paradigm, Burroughs explores the possibilities for an in-between position. Part of the narrative of *Naked Lunch* takes place

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<sup>336</sup> Lydenberg, “Beyond Good and Evil”, 75

<sup>337</sup> *The Job*, 144

in an imagined country with the highly suggestive name of Interzone. One of his characters remarks, “There is always a space *in-between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils, throwing out globs of that un-D.T. to fall anywhere and grow into some degenerate cancerous life form, reproducing a hideous random image.” (NL,131, emphasis original’s). The search for Interzone, a Promised Land of sorts, is a crusade for the annihilation of dual opposition. The essence of the Promised Land is that there, one will no longer be compelled to choose between “right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false”.<sup>338</sup> What’s more, Burroughs would attempt to debunk the inherent fallacy in these oppositions by creating a number of conflicting pairs / couples which essentially **feed off of one another**, thus demonstrating the utter impossibility of clear-cut opposition. For every doctor, there is a patient, for every colonialist – a nationalist, for every wise man - a convert, for every dealer - a *junkie*, for every hustler - a mark. These pairs cannot exist without one another, because they are variations of the archetypal contrasting pair Burroughs would be obsessed with throughout his writing – that of the parasite and the host.<sup>339</sup> He is mesmerized by the case of one entity thriving at the expense, and to the total annihilation of another. Be it in political, scientific or interpersonal relationships, there is always an abuser and an abused. As Robin Lydenberg aptly observes, Burroughs

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<sup>338</sup> *The Job*, 200

<sup>339</sup> Conflict and parasitism germinate first and foremost in language, Burroughs points out.

in *The Job*, he would write: “I have frequently spoken of word and image as viruses, or as acting as viruses and this is not an allegorical comparison. ... The IS of identity is in point of fact the virus mechanism. If we can infer purpose from behavior, then the purpose of the virus is TO SURVIVE. To survive at any expense to the host invaded. To be animal, to be a body. To be an animal body that the virus can invade” (*The Job*, 201-202)

would trace to the domination and control mechanisms embedded in the binary pattern of Western discourse.<sup>340</sup> The end of the novel contains a *bona fide* warning to the “gentle reader” (how that ironic invitation resonates with the ones we have already talked about in *Lolita*): “Gentle reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunist land crab” (*NL*, 230). Thus, according to Burroughs, if you believe in the existence of right and wrong, and refuse to see past this monochromatic opposition, you are addicted to illusory binary structures. The latter, much like junk, consumerism and sex, would lead to dismemberment, amputation, death.

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<sup>340</sup> Lydenberg, “Notes from the Orifice”, 62

### III.

It is clear, then, that, for Burroughs, man is the victim of a multitude of addictions. The harsh and ugly mosaic of aggression and violence invariably asserts itself, but we are oblivious to it. To break through blindness to clear vision is, for Burroughs, to break through the mind locks and word locks of language. Ginsberg seems to have said it best when he wrote, on what he referred to as “Burroughs’ method:”<sup>341</sup>

The method must be purest meat  
and no symbolic dressing  
actual visions & actual prisons  
as seen then and now.  
  
.....  
A naked lunch is natural to us,  
we eat reality sandwiches.  
But allegories are so much lettuce.  
Don't hide the madness.

And in a 1971 piece titled "Electronic Revolution" and later collected in *The Job*, one of his many prescriptions for disrupting the matrix of societal control structures, he uses an analysis of the effects of linguistic abstraction in order to propose a utopian scheme to reprogram the human species:

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<sup>341</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “On Burroughs’ Work,” *Reality Sandwiches*, 1953-1960 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963), p. 40

The aim of this project is to build a language in which certain falsifications inherent in all existing Western languages will be made incapable of formulation. The following falsifications [sic] to be deleted from the proposed language. The IS of Identity. You are an animal. You are a body. Now whatever you may be you are not an "animal," you are not a "body," because these are verbal labels. The IS of identity always carries the implication of that and nothing else, and it also carries the assignment of permanent condition. To stay that way. All name calling presupposes the IS of identity. [ ...] The definite article THE. THE contains the implications of one and only: THE God, THE universe, THE way, THE right, THE wrong. If there is another, then THAT universe, THAT way is no longer THE universe, THE way. The definite article THE will be deleted and the indefinite article A will take its place.

The whole concept of EITHER/OR. Right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false, the whole concept of OR will be deleted from the language and replaced by juxtaposition.<sup>342</sup>

Therefore, *Naked Lunch* will be an intense investigation into the use and function of language, and the ways in which cultural conceptions of reality are reflected in it. The novel is particularly concerned with the ways in which words are employed in order to dictate, legitimate and perpetrate those conceptions, thereby imprisoning the individual. The language of the book is extravagant and scandalous, yet *Naked Lunch* is one of the most literal books ever written. Its stern criticism of allegory, however, has turned out to be very tempting to the humanistic critic, confronted with it<sup>343</sup>. Few have resisted the

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<sup>342</sup> *The Job*, 200

<sup>343</sup> Frank D. McConnell's "William Burroughs and the Literature of Addiction", (*The Massachusetts Review*, Vol 8. No 4 (Autumn, 1967), pp 665-680 provides one of the earliest and most perspicacious analyses on Burroughs' obsession with the "real".



temptation to “dress it up”, to dilute its realistic descriptions and render them more abstract and thereby less threatening<sup>344</sup>. That would be doing the work injustice, for Burroughs believed that words are screens, mechanisms aimed at obfuscating and hiding reality. According to Burroughs, language’s major problem is that, while it was sharp-edged and divisive, able to cut like a razor once, it had more recently become unhinged from its human matrix. Words were no longer communicatory or even contextual but, rather, “weapons” of control used to inflict psychological and physical damage upon unknowing victims. Burroughs’ critical stance toward language derived much from Korzybski<sup>345</sup> and Spengler’s theories and focused on the printed word as a conditioning

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<sup>344</sup> Among the critics who have correctly identified this temptation of *Naked Lunch*, Robin Lydenberg and Frank D. McConnell have been particularly convincing in their understanding and interpretation of this critical trend.

<sup>345</sup> Burroughs attended lectures by Korzybski at the Institute of General Semantics in Chicago. He recommended *Science and Sanity* to Allen Ginsberg in a letter dated March 18, 1949 (*Letters*, 44). Alfred Korzybski’s first book, *Manhood of Humanity*, was published in 1921. In it, he proposed and explained in detail a new theory of humankind: mankind as a time-binding class of life. Korzybski’s work culminated in the founding of a discipline that he called general semantics (GS). As Korzybski explicitly said, GS should not be confused with semantics, a different subject. The basic principles of general semantics, which include time-binding, are outlined in *Science and Sanity*, published in 1933. In 1938 Korzybski founded the Institute of General Semantics and directed it until his death in Lakeville, Connecticut, USA.

Korzybski’s work held a view that human beings are limited in what they know by (1) the structure of their nervous systems, and (2) the structure of their languages. Human beings cannot experience the world directly, but only through their “abstractions” (nonverbal impressions or “gleanings” derived from the nervous system, and verbal indicators expressed and derived from language). Sometimes our perceptions and our languages actually mislead us as to the “facts” with which we must deal. Our understanding of what is going on sometimes lacks *similarity of structure* with what is actually going on. He stressed training in awareness of abstracting, using techniques that he had derived from his study of

agent that controlled internal beliefs and external behavior. The horror which this mutation of language provokes is aptly reflected in the following quote: "Words cut like buzz saws. Words [...] vibrate the entrails to jelly. Cold strange words [...] fall like icy nets on the mind. Virus words that can eat the brain to muttering shreds. Idiot tunes that stick in the throat round and round night and day." (NL, 207)

Informed by Korzybski's ideas about linguistic abstraction, the novel articulated Burroughs's profound mistrust of metaphoric language, especially its frequent deployment to maintain the status quo by demonizing deviation from the norm. In a much-examined scene early in the novel, a junkie uses two descriptions of a particular technique for taking heroin to demonstrate how such language distorts the reality of the event:

You know how this pin and dropper routine is put down: "She seized a safety pin caked with blood and rust, gouged a great hole in her leg which seemed to hang open like an obscene, festering mouth waiting for unspeakable congress with the dropper which she now plunges out of sight into the gaping wound. But her hideous galvanized need (hunger of insects in dry places) has broken the dropper off deep in the flesh of her ravaged thigh (looking rather like a poster on soil erosion). But what does she care? She does not even bother to remove the splintered glass, looking down at her bloody haunch

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mathematics and science. He called this awareness, this goal of his system, "consciousness of abstracting". His system included modifying the way we approach the world, e.g., with an attitude of "I don't know; let's see," to better discover or reflect its realities as shown by modern science. One of these techniques involved becoming inwardly and outwardly quiet, an experience that he called, "silence on the objective levels". For additional information, see Ross Evans Paulson's *Language, science, and action : Korzybski's general semantics : a study in comparative intellectual history* and Joseph Samuel Bois' *The art of awareness; a textbook on general semantics*'.

with the cold blank eyes of a meat trader. What does she care for the atom bomb, the bed bugs, the cancer rent...."

The real scene you pinch up some leg flesh and make a quick stab hole with a pin. Then fit the dropper over, not in the hole and feed the solution slow and careful so it doesn't squirt out the sides.... (NL, 9-10)

The first description is clearly hyperbolic. It has been inspired by political rhetoric and popular journalism of the period. The procedure is eroticized and elicits a response based on horror, disgust, and fascination. The addict is reduced to a figure of inhuman need, impervious to both her own bodily disintegration and the larger concerns appropriate to the human community from which she has fallen. The second, in contrast, offers a plain account of the technique.

We can say that Burroughs was so disappointed with the ways in which words taint reality, that he wrote with the intention of pulling apart the very epistemological and linguistic systems, which underline Western Civilization. Much like the other works considered in the present study, *Naked Lunch* launches a well-calculated offense against conventional morality by means of extolling the merits of an "immoral" way of life. It treats the unsavory subjects of drug addiction, rampant homosexuality and sado-masochistic sex rituals with brutal, almost scientific precision. Above all, however, it is an assault on the literary establishment and the dominant social discourses. Within a cold war culture seemingly obsessed with fears of contamination – from UFO sightings to films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) – it was Spengler's

pseudomorphosis<sup>346</sup> that gave Burroughs the notion that words are aggressive, contaminating and ubiquitous as viruses. Burroughs viewed the corruption of the present – as reflected in language, institutions, culture and people – as resulting from a Faustian infection as it were. In this Faustian paradigm, something living is transformed into dead matter. In a scientific Spenglerian swagger, Burroughs declared,

It is thought that the virus is a degeneration from a more complex life form. It may at one time have been capable of independent life. Now it has fallen to the borderline between living and dead matter. It can exhibit living qualities only in a host, by using the life of another – the renunciation of life itself, a *falling* towards inorganic, inflexible machine, towards dead matter.” (NL, 122)

Paradoxically, Burroughs viewed the inorganic dead matter as more objective than that which had been marred by cultural growth. As Spengler wrote, “The brain rules, because

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<sup>346</sup> Alfred Korzybski’s linguistic theories and Wilhelm Reich’s psychology also influenced Burroughs’ thinking on this matter. I go into some detail regarding Korzybski’s views later on in the chapter. As for Reich, he famously proclaimed his distrust of language when he observed that “the word language disturbs the language of expression.” He then went on to define a superior mode of expression, which encompasses “the total expression of an organism” and which he names “character-attitude”. For more detail, see Wilhelm Reich, *An Introduction to Orgonomy*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, pp 150-160. But even more than his views on language, Reich had a profound influence on Burroughs who wholeheartedly embraced his theories on the orgones (energy-filled substances found in the air and capable of enhancing the body’s natural vitality). Burroughs built many an “orgone box”, self-designed contraptions in which he would spend significant amounts of time “charging” his body and restoring what modern life has been sucking out of it. Numerous people who have interacted with Burroughs seem to have been fascinated with the boxes, which could be anything from a ramshackle hut to an old refrigerator.

the soul abdicates.”<sup>347</sup> As Doctor Benway, the excessively sane scientist and colonizer of human imagination in *Naked Lunch* triumphantly declares, “The study of thinking machines teaches us more about the brain than we can learn by introspective methods. Western man is externalizing himself in the form of gadgets.” (*NL*, 23) This, to Burroughs, constitutes the most significant danger society is facing.

The search upon which Burroughs embarks as an author is one aiming at understanding the particularities of dead matter. In order to achieve this, one must go beyond words. Burroughs dismisses them as mere junk: “Leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, priest talk, mother talk, family talk, love talk,”<sup>348</sup> he would invite his reader. In *The Job*, he would argue that drugs are unnecessary, that the mind can open up to a number of exotic possibilities, (e.g. space travel) simply by leaving “the verbal garbage behind”. So convinced is Burroughs in the inevitability and ultimate necessity of his quest that he envisions himself as a New Age Moses, leading the way to a promised land in which language will be redefined. “I say open the door and the whole universe will rush in,” he lectured in a letter to Ginsberg. “Go on the nod and dream of a square universe. I stand with the FACTS.”<sup>349</sup>

*Naked Lunch* is thus a product of Burroughs’ intent to create a work of art like none other. The very structure of this disjointed novel is so peculiar that one can be

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<sup>347</sup> In addition to the purely technological aspects, Spengler warned that the “scientific worlds” and the philosophy of Europe were “superficial worlds, practical, soulless” and that life within them was no longer to be lived as something self-evident hardly a matter of consciousness, let alone choice.” *Form and Actuality*, 353

<sup>348</sup> *The Job*, 223-24

<sup>349</sup> *Letters of William Burroughs*, 315

excused for it novel an anti-narrative. *Naked Lunch* has neither a beginning nor an end. Burroughs himself claimed, perhaps a tad bit exaggerating, that he had no recollection of composing it:

I awoke from The Sickness at age forty-five, calm and sane, and in reasonably good health except for a weakened liver and the look of borrowed flesh common to all who survive The Sickness.... Most survivors do not remember the delirium in detail. I apparently took detailed notes on sickness and delirium. I have no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title of *Naked Lunch*. (NL, xxxvii)

The novel was only assembled in its present manner because the publisher, who received a stack of sheets in the manuscript, insisted on **some** order. The sequence of events is completely arbitrary.<sup>350</sup> It is conceived on the basis of rapid, syncopated interlocking fragments which could very well have followed a different order. The narrative technique owes a lot to Tzara's Dadaistic experiments, as well as Gertrude Stein, Kafka and Proust.<sup>351</sup>

Disjointed and scattered narrative notwithstanding, *Naked Lunch* was written with a definite sense of urgency, and with a specific agenda in mind. John Lardas calls it both a chronicle of an imprisoned America and a manifesto for cultural and individual

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<sup>350</sup> *Litt Outlaw*, 45

<sup>351</sup> For the better part of the 1950s and the 1960s, Burroughs would work on perfecting his technique, almost always in collaboration with the Swiss-Canadian painter and writer Brion Gysin. The two would often conceive a text based on the technique of the collage. They would paste together bits and pieces of other people's poetry and prose they have obtained by literally driving a knife through several pages and "cutting them up", then re-assembling the fragments. Those methods, referred to as the "cut up" and the "fold-up" were further perfected by means of a tape recorder, a movie projector etc.

liberation from “alien” history.<sup>352</sup> Burroughs, for his part, believed that America needed a new type of hero. He perceived the cultural and intellectual situation in the US in the 1950s as nothing short of dire, and believed that the country was in need of a new intellectual challenge. He was convinced that a new kind of American adventure must be put forward as well. In January 1955 he wrote a blurb for the then-unfinished work: “This book is a must for anyone who would understand the sick soul, sick unto death, of the atomic age.”<sup>353</sup>

As a book describing a sick soul, *Naked Lunch* is extremely effective, for, as we have had occasion to notice, it is a deeply shocking, highly graphic novel. “In my writing I am acting as a map maker, an explorer of psychic areas ... a cosmonaut of inner space, and I see no point in exploring areas that have already been thoroughly surveyed.”<sup>354</sup> Burroughs points out. The unexplored areas are, of course, the detailed repulsive descriptions of bodies which constitute some of the most memorable passages of the novel. But the body as described by Burroughs is not like the ones we all have – it is a much more intricate and deeply symbolic machine.

The very body parts, as we will see shortly, often take on a life of their own. They are frequently described in a language which underscores its own arbitrariness and unreliability as a system of naming and representation. If Burroughs’ fiction is literal, it is because he is convinced that it is only through making the word tangible, material, visible that we can see and debunk “the enemy direct” and free the body from the prison in which language has shoved it. In his own obscenity trial, he would state that, in the same

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<sup>352</sup> Lardas, 191

<sup>353</sup> *Letters to Allen Ginsberg*, 88

<sup>354</sup> In *Snack*, 1975

way in which nobody would think about reproaching a doctor for describing the manifestations and symptoms of an illness, disgusting as those may be, the writer should be allowed to describe the human condition the way he sees it. “*Naked Lunch* treats [a] health problem,” Burroughs would state unequivocally, and go on, “it is necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting” (*NL*, 69).<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Similarly, with *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs attempted to eradicate once and for all the distinction between science and literature. In his closing argument to the court, Edward De Grazia, the attorney representing *Naked Lunch* and its publisher, Grove Press, read an excerpt from a letter that Burroughs. It had been sent during the trial, and constitutes the only instance during the proceedings when he explicitly addressed the court's concerns. In this remarkable document, Burroughs took up the relation between the monstrous, the unspeakable, and scientific containment in his work:

The question: What is sex? And the concomitant questions as to what is obscene, impure, is [sic] not asked, let alone answered precisely because of barriers of semantic anxiety which precludes [sic] our free or, I think, objective scientific examination of sexual phenomena. How can these phenomena be studied if one is forbidden to write or think about them? Unless and until a free examination of sexual manifestations is allowed, man will continue to be controlled by sex rather than controlling. A phenomena [sic] totally unknown because deliberately ignored and ruled out as a subject for writing and research. What we are dealing with here is a barrier of what can only be termed medieval superstition and fear, precisely the same barrier that held up the natural sciences for some hundreds of years with dogma rather than examination and research. In short, the same objective methods that have been applied to natural science should now be applied to sexual phenomena with a view to understand and control these manifestations. A doctor is not criticized for describing the manifestations and symptoms of an illness, even though the symptoms may be disgusting. I feel that a writer has the same right to the same freedom. In fact, I think the time has come for the line between literature and science, a purely arbitrary line, to be erased. (*Naked Lunch* xxxiv-xxxv)



Burroughs' writing has very few precedents. We have already seen in the section devoted to addiction that he followed to some extent in the footsteps of the great Romantic poets who incorporated their addiction into their literary creation. Yet the very way in which Burroughs writes is highly idiosyncratic and in large measure that of the autodidact. Among the writers who influenced him was Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Burroughs even visited him in Meudon with Ginsberg and Gregory Corso two years before Céline's death. He often praised the French writer for having successfully "escaped" from the imprisonment of the traditional novel:

[Céline] has essentially broken free from the constraints of the conventional novel, which is nothing but "a highly artificial form" which is only as old as the nineteenth century and which is as arbitrary as the sonnet but which has come to dominate the ways in which we think about and discuss literature, hence causing for anything which does not conform to the norm to be dismissed as "unintelligible".<sup>356</sup>

Burroughs particularly enjoyed Céline's twist on the picaresque (or no-plot) novel, whose tradition can be traced all the way back to the *Satyricon* and Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveler*. It is significant that some of the critical misconceptions put forth by critics with regard to Burroughs' work had been raised with regard to Céline's as well. Last but not least, as an astute reader of the Frenchman's novels, Burroughs saw beyond mainstream interpretations. He did not see Céline as an author who presents a chronicle of despair. On the contrary, he found him humorous, lively and funny.<sup>357</sup> Similarly to Céline, Burroughs was fascinated by the topos of the voyage. He portrayed life as a

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<sup>356</sup> Interview with Philippe Mikriamos, 1974: 14

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

journey, a cross-country itinerary through the maze of garbage, boredom, and decay that Burroughs calls "U.S. drag": "You can't see it, you don't know where it comes from" (*NL*, 12). Much like Bardamu achieved a higher degree of understanding of the world he lived in when traveling, the characters of *Naked Lunch* appear to be wandering aimlessly. This seemingly dazed state, however, sometimes brings about intense clarity:

Something falls off you when you cross the border into Mexico, and suddenly the landscape hits you straight with nothing between you and it, desert and mountains and vultures; little wheeling specks and others so close you can hear wings cut the air (a dry husking sound), and when they spot something they pour out of the blue sky . . . down in a black funnel. (*NL*, p. 14)

Burroughs' world is a carnival one. He manages to out-do Celine in his descriptions of life as a freak show. The pages are populated by a number of weird, grotesque and plain disgusting men and women. Norman Mailer, who had attempted to retool the psychopath into an exemplary figure in "The White Negro," likened Burroughs's images to the religious vision of Hieronymus Bosch. Writes Mailer,

Nowhere, as in *Naked Lunch's* collection of monsters, half-mad geniuses, cripples, mountebanks, criminals, perverts, and putrefying beasts is there such a modern panoply of the vanities of the human will, of the excesses of evil which occur when the idea of personal or intellectual power reigns superior to the compassions of the flesh. (*NL*, xviii)

Like Céline's characters, Burroughs' are sick, obsessed, conniving, low, depraved and terrifying. Taking up Mary McCarthy's observation of the carnival origins of the

characters in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs would elaborate: “The carny world was the one I exactly intended to create – a kind of Midwestern, small-town, cracker-barrel, pratfall type folklore, very much my own background. That world was an integral part of America and existed nowhere else, at least not in the same form.”<sup>358</sup> Not only is this world a part of America, but describing it meant that Burroughs would follow in the footsteps of such literary giants as Poe, Fitzjames O’Brian, Sherwood Anderson, Flannery O’Conner and Nathaniel West. Like these earlier splendid poets of the grotesque, he manages to depict a world which is simultaneously terrifying and moving, repulsive and capable of provoking the deepest feeling of compassion.

Burroughs likewise took Céline’s pastiches, of which he thought highly, a step further, to the non-sequitur, in an attempt to demonstrate that language did not always produce meaning but rather, its very opposite. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Naked Lunch*:

Reading the paper ... Something about a triple murder in the Rue de la Merde, Paris: ‘An adjusting of scores.’ ... I keep slipping away. ... ‘The police have identified the author ... Pepe El Culito ... The Little Ass Hole, an affectionate diminutive.’ Does it really say that? ... I try to focus the words ... They separate in meaningless mosaic.” (*NL*, 63).

Carried out in the puzzle of intertwining mass-culture argots, intellectual discourses and the rhetoric of science, which characterize the novel, the passage illustrates the ways in which this particular linguistic mix renders reality opaque and hinders true understanding.

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<sup>358</sup> In an interview with Conrad Knickerbocker, 1965. Reprinted as ‘The Art of Fiction No 36: William S. Burroughs’ in the *Paris Review*, 2004, pp 1-37

It lures the reader into a maze of sorts, where the same words and expressions dazzle and confuse by means of a series of repetitions, re-arrangements and re-definitions of the same key components. This highly intricate mechanism aims at ensnaring and blinding human beings to the machinations of a vast conspiracy they remain completely unaware of. The constant game of revealing and obfuscating meaning, the permanent defining and redefining of linguistic positions is the reason why William Burroughs firmly believed that the English language must be reinvented, stripped bare of its initial functions and meanings.

Even the most liberal and forgiving readers cannot remain undaunted at the level of offensiveness *Naked Lunch* attains. In his book *Chaos in the Novel – The Novel in Chaos*, Alvin Seltzer describes his visceral reaction to the narrative, which, I am sure, has been shared by many a reader: “Our gorges rise right along with our intellects and emotions.”<sup>359</sup> *Naked Lunch* is a violent attack against the very standards of literary decency, and a well thought-out challenge to the very epistemological assumptions of those standards. Its prime target is high-brow literature and its obsession with things of value. “Naked Mr. America, burning frantic with self-bone love, screams out: ‘My asshole confound the Louvre! I fart ambrosia and shit pure gold turds! My cock spurts soft diamonds in the morning sunlight’” (*NL*, 69). The lewdness of the language is in stark contrast with the serious basic claim being made here – that the natural, visceral and ultimate value is unadorned human waste, which belongs right with the staple of international culture, the Louvre. At least, unlike transient Western achievements, human waste remains an undisputable and constant presence.

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<sup>359</sup> Alvin J. Seltzer. *Chaos in the Novel – The Novel in Chaos* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974, p. 353

Let us examine next a particularly memorable passage from the book, a routine in which Burroughs introduces a carnival performer who had taught his asshole how to talk. This episode is significant because it is rather succinct and dense, yet successfully illustrates a number of linguistic mechanisms at play in the novel as a whole. Here is the story as told by Dr. Benway:

"Did I ever tell you about the man who taught his asshole to talk? . . .

"This ass talk had a sort of gut frequency. It hit you right down there like you gotta go.

You know when the old colon gives you the elbow and it feels sorta cold inside, and you know all you have to do is turn loose? Well this talking hit you right down there, a bubbly, thick stagnant sound, a sound you could smell.

"This man worked for a carnival you dig, and to start with it was like a novelty ventriloquist act. Real funny, too, at first. He had a number he called 'The Better 'Ole' that was a scream, I tell you. I forget most of it but it was clever. Like, 'Oh I say, are you still down there, old thing?'

"'Nah! I had to go relieve myself.'

"After a while the ass started talking on its own. He would go in without anything prepared and his ass would ad-lib and toss the gags back at him every time.

"Then it developed sort of teeth-like little raspy incurving hooks and started eating. He thought this was cute at first and built an act around it, but the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth. Finally it talked all the time day and night, you could hear him for blocks screaming at it to shut up, and beating it with his fist, and sticking candles up it, but nothing did any good and the asshole said to him: 'It's you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don't need you around here any more. I can talk and eat and shit.' (NL, 224)

The situation would progressively get worse and worse. We are in science-fiction-land as we read the description of the talking asshole's fate. The mouth becomes covered with a jelly-like film until it is sealed over. The head is abolished, and would be removed safe for the fact that the asshole cannot see – it needs eyes. As for the brain and the nerve connections, they are blocked and the skull – sealed off. The asshole has usurped all the functions of the normal human body.

Disturbing and disgusting as this passage may appear to the sophisticated reader, it is likewise screamingly funny.<sup>360</sup> This is satire at its best. It reads like a modern-day Rabelaisian or Swiftean<sup>361</sup> routine. The mouth and the asshole have doubtlessly been chosen because, as we saw in the section on addiction, they are very similar. On a deeper

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<sup>360</sup> Serious though its theme is, *Naked Lunch* is not without humor. The satirist is savage and cruel, and his laughter is quite bitter. Nonetheless, there are numerous funny episodes in the novel. To quote but a handful of examples: Dr. Berger's Mental Health Hour (pp. 136-139) and Doc Benway's exploits are both good examples of the ways in which delusional scientists operate. The practical jokes of A. J., the "last of the big time spenders" (p. 154) are also quite funny.

<sup>361</sup> The parallel with Swift has generated a debate which, albeit irrelevant to my particular exploration, nonetheless deserves some attention. Burroughs himself stated, in the "Deposition," or Preface, to *Naked Lunch*, that the Blue Movie sequence is "a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" (*NL*, xlv). Critic David Lodge, however, challenges this claim on the grounds that Burroughs' narrative "suspends rather than activates the reader's moral sense" (in David Lodge, "Objections to William Burroughs," p. 165) In a later reexamination, Lodge would argue that the elimination of a realistic frame for the satire robs us of our "bearings and empirical reality". Basically, Lodge believes that *Naked Lunch* fails as moral satire in the manner of Swift: he judges the narrative too confused, uncontrolled and an interesting failure at best. The absence of norms "by which its nauseating grotesquerie can be measured and interpreted, he claims makes it impossible to apply "the episode ... to the real world and ad draw and instructive moral" (in D. Lodge, *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 38)

symbolic level, of course, they are both holes. As such, they are symbols of emptiness. By constructing the improbable situation of the mouth-turned-asshole, Burroughs draws our attention to the possible interchangeability between the two. If the mouth, as an outlet for language, represents the center of speech, i.e. the linguistic, the asshole is, quite literally, a center of the body. Both orifices are indispensable to the performance of vital survival functions. They process and push out words and vital nutrients as the case may be. In the carny man's case, however, those two have become one. As Robin Lydenberg observes in the excellent study, "Notes from the Orifice: Language and the Body in William S. Burroughs", "This anecdote challenges the comforting myth that it is language that distinguishes man from beast, or man from his own bestiality."<sup>362</sup>

The possibility of man remaining human is, of course, a particularly unlikely prospect for gloomy Burroughs. His characters are frequently distorted past any resemblance of humanity. The man with the talking asshole is perhaps the most memorable of these personae, but he is in good company of other (barely human) men and women. The latter have come to be defined and dominated by a single, atrophied, gaping orifice: Willy the Disk, the terminal *junkie*, has a body which has entirely rotted away save for the "round disk mouth" through which he takes his drugs; "the old gash", whose son has raped her in an attempt to "stem her word horde" (*NL*, 40); the private investigator known only as Clem Snide Private Asshole. By insisting on the grotesque, by **naming** this grotesque, then, Burroughs is aiming at demonstrating how the individual becomes obliterated, reduced to a sickening emptiness, a revolting hole. But if the human

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<sup>362</sup> Lydenberg, 58

body is almost invariably unattractive in Burroughs, it is because he finds the very existence of men an outrage in itself. Jeff Nuttall sums up his attitude splendidly:

*The Naked Lunch* is an angry circus in which the sick joke is not only a weapon against society but against human physical existence itself. Its implication is that we have been conned into our nauseous vulnerable bodies it sets out to dislocate the mental norm that keeps us there, in the flesh, by schizoid juxtapositions of humor, nausea and ... and exquisite grace of prose.<sup>363</sup>

Furthermore, the mouth / asshole interchangeability draws our attention to one of the building blocks of the Burroughs narrative – the system of opposites he puts in place and maintains throughout *Naked Lunch*. The novel's fragmentary form is frequently explained as an attempt to reproduce the disjunctions of consciousness induced by addiction. However, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that Burroughs had in mind a strategic disruption of interpretive possibilities as well. For all its lack of formal structure, the novel is surprisingly coherent and organized when it comes to maintaining a system of oppositions which embody all that is wrong with the world. It is precisely these oppositions that Burroughs refers to as “word locks” of the kind capable of “tying up a civilization for a thousand years.”<sup>364</sup>

The routines under examination are characterized by an obsession with literalness and logical progression. Moreover, in them, the whole body is condensed, displaced and

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<sup>363</sup> Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 1968

<sup>364</sup> *The Job*, 200



represented by an isolated body part. This literary device is known as *metonymy*.<sup>365</sup> These truncated representations of human bodies are simplified, therefore easier to understand. They allow the reader to evade the screens and complications, which Burroughs associates with language. As we have noted previously, Burroughs believed that language robs us of individual life and of the world itself. It obfuscates reality and creates a "gray veil between you and what you saw or more often did not see."<sup>366</sup> Words subject us to a

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<sup>365</sup> If I choose not to dwell on the definition of metonymy at length, it is out of respect for Burroughs' own attitude towards this subject. He was not interested in definitions of language, but, rather, in its functionality. Yet it is important to acknowledge here that the work of Roman Jakobson, who describes metonymy in his essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" in *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: 1956), has been instrumental to the understanding of many of the linguistic gestures employed by the author. Subsequent studies in the subject have been heavily influenced by Jakobson's ideas. Basically, metonymy is contrasted to metaphor and the two tropes have come to represent two contrasting ways of using language. While metaphors are associations based on similarity, joining a plurality of words, metonymies are associations by contiguity, or movements within a single word. Furthermore, the two can be compared and contrasted in accordance with the following pattern (which I have derived from Jakobson's essay)"

metaphor	metonymy
selection and substitution of one word for another	combination of one word with another
mythic, symbolic	literal and logical
vertical hierarchy: origin and center	horizontal linearity: play and reversibility
transcendence	immanence
unity, order	multiplicity, change
completeness, lyrical arrests or suspension	incompleteness, temporal urgency and drive

Besides Jakobson's seminal essay, other important texts exploring metonymy include Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1979), Gérard Genette's *Figures III* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972) and David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977)

<sup>366</sup> *The Ticket that Exploded*, op. cit., 209

"continual barrage of images makes haze over everything, like walking around in smog."<sup>367</sup>

#### IV.

Burroughs' seminal novel was one of the last books to be brought to court on obscenity charges. It appeared before the Massachusetts Supreme Court in the early sixties.<sup>368</sup> Some of the most prominent writers and critics of the time had to defend it and prove that it was, indeed, a worthy work of literature. John Ciardi described the novel as a "monumentally moral descent into the hell of narcotics addiction" created by an author "a writer of great power and artistic integrity engaged in a profoundly meaningful search for true values." He added that *Naked Lunch's* obscenities were "inseparable from the total

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<sup>367</sup> *The Job*, 34

<sup>368</sup> The book was banned in Boston in 1962 due to the descriptions of child murder and acts of pedophilia. As Frederick Whiting points out, the initial public response to the US publication of *Naked Lunch* in 1962 was an almost unanimous interdiction. Interests and authorities as diverse as US Customs, the trustees of the University of Chicago (excerpts from *Naked Lunch* were slated to appear in the Winter 1959 issue of the University-sponsored *Chicago Review* until a ruling by the trustees suppressed the issue.), the US Postal Service, the City of Los Angeles, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and a host of journalists and literary critics were all in agreement that what Burroughs had to say should not be said. (Whiting, 146) That decision for the ban was reversed in 1966 by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. The ruling reflected a change of official opinion about more than whether *Naked Lunch* was speakable. The controversy surrounding the novel's publication was the last instance of complete literary censorship in the US—the end of the unspeakable per se. (Frederick Whiting points out that, while there have been instances of official and unofficial censorship since 1966, two features of the *Naked Lunch* case make it distinctive: the breadth and solidarity of official condemnation of the book and the charge of specifically literary obscenity. For a more detailed account of the trials, see Whiting, 169)

fabric and effect of the moral message.”<sup>369</sup> Allen Ginsberg similarly judged Burroughs’ intentions as “moral ... defending the good,” and lauded the author himself for the “courage” and “idealism” of his “total confession” of “exactly what was going on inside his head.”<sup>370</sup> Norman Mailer pronounced perhaps the most hyperbolic praise of all by stating that “William Burroughs is in my opinion – whatever his conscious intention may be – a religious writer. There is a sense in *Naked Lunch* of the destruction of the soul ... It is a vision of how mankind would act if man was totally divorced from eternity.”<sup>371</sup> He goes on to build his defense case by drawing parallels with “what used to be called “automatic writing”, the idea that “one’s best artistic production seems to bear no relation to what one is thinking” and concludes that *Naked Lunch*’s importance to him as that of a deeply religious book, for “[I]t is Hell precisely.”<sup>372</sup>

The least striking aspect of these three pronouncements is their content. All three defenders knew Burroughs personally, had a lot of respect for him as an artist and made no secret of their desire to affirm his novel’s artistic value no matter what. However, the overtly moralistic critical language in which all three defenders proclaim *Naked Lunch*’s literary importance comes as somewhat of a surprise. The rhetoric of church and religion, as demonstrated by the different statements, and the language of mainstream humanistic literary criticism seem to overlap here. The vindication of the book in the courtroom is **not** carried out on purely aesthetic grounds. Instead, a distinctly religious and moral realm is evoked in the course of this defense. Ciardi, Ginsberg and Mailer seem to appeal

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<sup>369</sup> John Ciardi, “Book Burning and Sweet Sixteen”, *Saturday Review*, 27 June 1959, p. 22.

<sup>370</sup> Excerpts from the Boston trial reprinted in *Naked Lunch*, p. xxxii

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid*, pp. xvi-xvii

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*

to a tradition of literary humanism, based on a moral vision of the universe and on the place of art as perpetrator of moral values in this universe. Essentially, the argument seems to go as follows: Even though *Naked Lunch* depicts acts which are reprehensible when considered from the standpoint of conventional morality, it does so with a higher moral purpose in mind. It does so in order to provoke the reader's reaction and educate him. As such, it is both scandalous and moral. As Robin Lydenberg aptly observes, "Whether *Naked Lunch* is condemned as morally bankrupt or championed as a novel of moral quest, it is being judged within the framework of ethical dualism which dominates Western thought."<sup>373</sup>

What's peculiar and in no small measure humorous at the same time is that the defense of *Naked Lunch* was carried out in a manner of reconciling opposites. As such, it exemplifies precisely the kind of dual-entrapment thought-and-language system Burroughs was trying to escape from. As we have already had occasion to note, the annihilation of moral dualism, inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, was an obsession for Burroughs. That said, what I hope to demonstrate in this section is that William Burroughs did, in fact, have a distinct moral stance in writing the novel, it is just not at all the one which has been attributed to it by critics and admirers alike.

When Daniel Odier takes up the claims that qualify Burroughs as a "great moralist" and asks him to comment on them, the writer would claim that he is, indeed, a moralist, "perhaps too much so."<sup>374</sup> However, he proceeds to clarify his moral position as the demand for the destruction of three basic "formulas": nation, family and the methods

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<sup>373</sup> Lydenberg, 78

<sup>374</sup> *The Job*, 50

of birth and reproduction. These are the very “word / mind locks” that he feels so strongly about. He considers mechanisms that hinder thinking and feeling and stifle spontaneous life and change.<sup>375</sup> We have already seen that one of the principal dangers, which Burroughs discerns in language, is its ability to perpetrate the tyranny of mind over body. The rhetoric of morality and religion, which enforce the sentimentality of romance, are the primary culprits and therefore the target of his attack.

A routine titled “Prophet Hour” in *Naked Lunch* illustrates his attempts to debunk the carnival illusions of religion. The routine personifies religion wielding its “Word Hoard” and marshalling its forces for “converting ... live organs into dead bullshit” (*NL*, 116). It is followed by a detrimental attack on romance, embodied in a gay soap opera, which underscores the parasitic nature of all love (*NL*, 128-130).<sup>376</sup> The objections we

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<sup>375</sup> It is worth noting that the “word locks” Burroughs tries to “blow up” in a manner of speaking are not unlike the “blocks” which to Roland Barthes determine “the readability” of a text: “These blocks have names: on the one hand truth, on the other empiricism.” (Barthes, *S/Z*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 30)

<sup>376</sup> The choice of a gay soap opera as satirical target might appear a bit strange considering that William Burroughs was a homosexual. Yet it is important to understand the ways in which the writer treated the topic of homosexuality –his own and that of others. He deplored women and more particularly, the type of organization which stems from allowing women to have things their way: “Find yourself in a matriarchy walk don’t run to the nearest frontier. If you run, some frustrate, latent queer cop will likely shoot you. So somebody wants to establish a beach head of homogeneity in a shambles of potentials like West Europe and USA? Another fucking matriarchy, Margaret Mead notwithstanding”. A society of men, free to experience and engage in their own sexuality without being threatened by females represented a kind of frontier myth to him. Being homosexual meant being truly male, and a society of just men constituted a safe haven for truth and beauty. What’s more, he blamed women for all the bad rap that men get, and insisted that being gay was an offense to a society run by women. “A *functioning* police state needs no police. Homosexuality does not occur to anyone as conceivable behavior. ... Homosexuality is a *political*

trace in it run are as follows: religion and romance are parasitic structures of thought which wiggle their way into the host, feed off of it and end up completely destroying it. The following parody contains the condensed form of Burroughs' attitude: "Why so pale and wan, fair bugger? Smell of dead leeches in a rusty tin can latch onto that live wound, suck out the body and blood and bones of Jeeeesus, leave him paralyzed from the waist down" (*NL*, 126). The world is decidedly one in which love and sentimentality have no place: "Love plays little part in my mythology", Burroughs owns up in "The Invisible Generation". "[My mythology] is one of war and conflict. I feel that what we call love is largely a fraud – a mixture of sentimentality and sex that has been systematically degraded and vulgarized by the virus power."<sup>377</sup>

Thus, according to Burroughs, the language of romantic idealism and religion is a virus which must **talk you out of** your body. Much like the virus, romantic idealism and religion have to devour the human being in order to survive. The two need to annihilate the host and invade his body since their rhetoric is so abstract that they lack a body of their own. Once again, as we have seen in the carny man episode, language has devoured the body and engulfed its humanity. Religion, then, much like drugs and sex, destroys the

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*crime* in a matriarchy." (*NL*, 23), he writes. In this and similar remarks, Burroughs revealed an even more misogynistic disposition than either Kerouac or Ginsberg, both of whom have been known for their stance against women. Yet Burroughs was equally quick to make the "distinction between us strong, manly, noble types and the leaping, jumping, window-dressing cocksucker." In his assertion of the essential Americanness of homosexuality, Burroughs interrogated contemporary definitions that were limited to homophobic accusations of "un-Americanness" and normative interpretations of orthodox psychology. He rejected the question of whether homosexuality was a crime or an illness, claiming instead that it could be a liberating cultural practice.

<sup>377</sup> "The Invisible Generation", *International Times* No.3, 1966

human body by either amputating it or condensing it to one insatiable organ of need, an orifice through which it absorbs that which it needs. This is the quest upon which all of Burroughs' mad scientists ultimately embark. Convinced that the human body, reduced to just a single organ, is a more efficient machine, they direct all their efforts towards coming up with a simplified human form: "The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate? ... Why not one all-purpose blob?" (NL, 131) If there is any improvement envisioned, it is always in the direction of reduction, downsizing, amputation: "The human body is filled up vit unnecessitated parts. You can get by vit one kidney. Vy have two?" (NL, 182), one of the mad scientists would observe, in his characteristically exaggerated German accent. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the type of surgery, or amputation, described is indeed a power play, an oppressive regulation of body and mind, and its purpose is control rather than liberation of the individual.

In the section on language, we have dwelled at length on Burroughs' desire to write in as literal a manner as possible. For him, literalness asserts not only the material facts of life in the body, but the literal possibility of escape from that body. Writes Robin Lydenberg,

By laying bare the abstract mechanisms by which metaphor and morality insinuate themselves into our thinking, Burroughs throws the reader into a horizontal world of literal meaning and materiality. The grotesque physical literalness of *Naked Lunch*, however, does not attempt to underscore the materiality of things as we find them in the

world. It refers to a materiality of absence, a kind of literal mysticism which opens up the possibility of “non-body” experience and the freedom and purity of silence”.<sup>378</sup>

Burroughs is an outspoken critic of religion, yet there is an added dimension which further complicates the analysis of his work. That he did not believe in God goes without saying. He did nonetheless have a firmly rooted belief in a magical universe, cast very much in the mold of the American original as exemplified by Emerson and Thoreau. Like Genet, he was fascinated by Baudelaire. His high school journal, the future writer elaborates his musings on Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil*. *The Flowers*, as well as Emerson and Thoreau, caused Burroughs to see a world of spirits, psychotic visions, curses, possessions and phantom beings behind everyday reality. Those constituted, according to his biographer Ted Morgan, the foundations of his idiosyncratic personal religion. Morgan would go as far as to speculate that Burroughs was not unlike the primitive man who leads his life with the full awareness that there are forces which need to be appeased, constantly at work.<sup>379</sup>

Burroughs’ personal religious universe was tightly interconnected with everyday existence, because it aimed at providing an alternative to it. As critic John Lardas points out in his *The Bop Apocalypse. The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs*, “[l]ike many postwar Americans, [the Beats] did not so much secularize the sacred as sacralize the secular, turning everyday existence into a drama of ultimate consequences.”<sup>380</sup> Burroughs refers to the ensemble of his world outlook as “my

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<sup>378</sup> Lydenberg, “Beyond Good and Evil”, 75

<sup>379</sup> For further information, see Ted Morgan’s *Literary Outlaw*, pp 230-240

<sup>380</sup> Lardas, 6



mythology”, and goes on to define it, using the framework of the Judeo-Christian tradition as a point of departure:

Heaven and hell exist in my mythology. Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning. I may add that none of the characters in my mythology are free. If they were free they would not still be in the mythological system, that is, in the cycle of conditioned action.<sup>381</sup>

Many of the experiences, narrated in *Naked Lunch*, constitute descriptions of events which verge on the sacred. An inherently contradictory phenomenon, the “sacred” eschews and defies easy categorization and constitutes, by all means, an event or events that out-imagine the mind. Despite all attempts at interpretative closure on the part of the analyst, the meaning of events, which we may deem “sacred” remains inexhaustible. At its most fundamental level, religion is the human response to such moments and events. The most visible form that it takes is institutional, its most visible function is conservative, and its most visible currency is existential solace. As a mode of being, however, religion does not necessarily maintain the traditions, values and comfort of the status quo. Nor should religion be considered solely in terms of denominational affiliation, church attendance or parish activity. Quite to the contrary, as John Lardas would argue, it can be, and most often is, a profoundly destabilizing force. It is the quintessential act of improvisation. In keeping with the spirit of the 1950s which profoundly influenced Burroughs, we can compare it to a Charlie Parker solo. His writing is characterized by the expressive use of dissonance and “a profundity of ideas, individual

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<sup>381</sup> “The Invisible Generation”, *International Times* No.3, 1966

tone, the ability to phrase subtly and swing constantly, [with] complete technical control.”<sup>382</sup>

Burroughs subverts religion and renders it destabilizing. Subverted religious rhetoric is used to carve out an alternative space. Burroughs’ own brand of the “sacred” challenges the legitimacy of the majority culture. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes, ideas of the sacred extend well beyond “their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience – intellectual, emotional, moral – can be given a meaningful form.”<sup>383</sup> Similarly, Burroughs, much like Kerouac and Ginsberg, possessed a constructive religious imagination. It allowed him to coordinate experiences, ideas and gestures into a coherent perspective by which to enchant the world and live within it.<sup>384</sup>

The Beats were heavily influenced by the teachings of Mysticism. They viewed their writings as a means of submission and an avenue of transcendence. The difference

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<sup>382</sup> Feather, *The Book of Jazz*, 93

<sup>383</sup> Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”, op. cit. 123

<sup>384</sup> Lardas suggests that the Beats lived according to a discernible, albeit loose, ethical structure, and implies that there was much more structure and pre-meditation to their actions than they were willing to admit. Sexual openness, drug use, criminality, traveling, and madness – were not simply transgressions of the period’s social and moral codes but physical enactments of a religious representation of the world. [...] Writes Lardas, “In the Beats’ case, the content of their religion was embodied not only in their behavior but in the metaphors they used to characterize reality. What they wrote about, how they wrote, and what they wrote about how they wrote all illuminate a shared orientation from which each man approached the world, lived in the world and looked back on the world. The burden of their art was to create a religious world in which ordinary decisions and actions would continually broach questions of existential and cosmic gravitas. In the words of Allen Ginsberg: “Go back, go back to the old legend / The Soul remembers and is true: / What has been most and least imagined, / No other, there is nothing new”.

in their approaches to Mystical teachings is helpful in elucidating Burroughs's special "brand" of the sacred. Kerouac and Ginsberg were aiming at attaining a state in which the individual fuses with their surroundings and attain an oceanic existence which one exists "on a level with the world in which it moves like water in water."<sup>385</sup> Burroughs, on the contrary, was interested in the ways in which the self gains a more complete understanding of the world. He did not aim at dissolving himself in his environment. Rather, he was driven by the desire to explore and understand the most intricate mechanisms behind human actions. He was obsessed with a quest for lucidity. For example, the character of the Peruvian medicine man in *Naked Lunch* bears testimony to his admiration for men of exceptional skills.<sup>386</sup> He can "foretell the future, locate lost or stolen objects, diagnose and treat illnesses and name the perpetrator of a crime." (*NL*, 100). Burroughs seems to want the same talents for himself. Being devoid of the gifts naturally, he attempts to compensate through the act of writing, in which he is capable of discerning and elucidating the most subtle connections existing between people and things. A heightened understanding of one's circumstances leads, like we have noticed in the other novels, to an embracing of life and its energy, and of celebrating it exactly the way it is.

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<sup>385</sup> The above quote comes from Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion*, but seems appropriate illustration of Kerouac and Ginsberg's point of view that the religious experience helps the individual be at peace with what is and what surrounds him.

<sup>386</sup> The man from Peru has also been influenced by Carlos Castaneda's character Don Juan.

## V.

William Burroughs, author of the most disturbingly realistic study of the descent into the pits of addiction, is adamant about the correlation existing between drugs and the creative process. He recognizes that it is through drugs that one often achieves the very lucidity about the human condition, which we have seen characterize the other authors in this study. He was able to see, understand and share a variety of human experiences, and put them in writing. This state of lucidity about the human condition could only be achieved through a complete withdrawal from everyday existence. One of the possibilities was ascending to that state through the use of narcotics:

I think your ability to read other people's thoughts is dependent on your ability to suspend your own, to suspend any preoccupations you might have. In other words, it is a matter of giving your full attention. This ties in with hallucinogenic drugs. I think that insofar as they help people to keep their eyes open or open their eyes, they are valuable. But if people made a habit of keeping their eyes open at all times, then many of the phenomena of hallucinogenic drugs will be produced simply by extending their own awareness, simply by seeing what is going on when they walk down the street.<sup>387</sup>

Further in the same interview, Burroughs would evoke Carlos Castaneda's tales of experiments with hallucinogenic drugs in the Andes, and tell the story of a young man who took some "far-out" drugs with a local medicine man. One was so powerful that it "removed all covers", stripped human beings naked of all their defenses and revealed them as they are. Terrified by the effect of the drug, he asks the medicine man what he

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<sup>387</sup> In his *Penthouse* interview with Graham Masterson and Andrew Rossabi, *Penthouse* [March 1972], p 52

had looked like under the influence. It is only then that he finds out that the other one never even glanced at him while the drugs were in effect. “No two people can take the little smoke and look at each other and live”, the medicine man claims. Burroughs is fascinated by this statement, for he reads further into it. He understands that the man under the influence of narcotics is outside of civilization, outside of the constraints of everyday expectations and restrictions. Therefore, two people who have seen one another without the protective mechanisms which civilization has forced them to adopt and perfect can not see each other as the civilized, tamed individuals they are supposed to be. Having taken the drug, having confronted their true self, there is no way they could look at themselves in the way they did before.<sup>388</sup>

The addict – the nature of the addiction, of course, being of no real importance – became a mythical figure for the Romantics. They saw the addict as a man enjoying total freedom. He existed in a state which provided an alternative to a stifling reality. It is the unbearable oppression of the quotidian which encourages one to seek escape in addiction.<sup>389</sup> Unfortunately, as Burroughs would demonstrate through the system of dealing and obtaining drugs, having a habit translates into a complex economic system, which successfully mimics the very negative phenomenon it set out to counteract.

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid. Burroughs himself embarked on a search for a similar magical substance. He had spent time in Peru and Columbia in search of *yage*, a hallucinatory drug native to these countries, believed to develop telepathic powers. Although these searches did not yield a magic potion of the desired properties, the searches themselves (on one of them, Burroughs was accompanied by an unwilling boy he had met in Mexico city and he was in love with) resulted in the half-deranged, half-philosophical text of *The Yage Letters*, composed in 1953. For more information, see *Everything Lost*, op. cit.

<sup>389</sup> A century later, Malcolm Lowry would say of his own drinking problem: “The real cause of alcoholism is the complete baffling sterility of existence as *sold* to you.” (Quoted in Schaffer, op.cit., 153)

Looking for junk, obtaining it, injecting it is an activity, born out of social inertia, apathy and disaffiliation typical of the so-called bourgeois capitalist societies. However, it is a cycle, and not an escape route. In *The Algebra of Need*, Eric Mottram establishes a fascinating parallel between *Naked Lunch* and some of Kafka's writings, based on the two authors treatment of the phenomenon of Capitalism. Mottram quotes Kafka's interview with Gustav Janouch: "Capitalism is a system of dependencies, which run from within to without, from without to within, from above to below, from below to above. All is dependent, all stands in chains. Capitalism is a condition of the soul and of the world."<sup>390</sup> Three years before his death, Kafka would write about the effect of this condition on his own soul. In his diary, we read, "I have but very rarely crossed out of this borderland between loneliness and community; I have taken root in it more than in loneliness itself."<sup>391</sup> He might have been describing the melancholy within the borderlands and lonely coupling in the world of William Burroughs. Writes Mottram, "Both writers share a continuous horrified awareness of the waste of human energy that passes for life."<sup>392</sup>

What ultimately renders Burroughs' writing so idiosyncratic is that he understands both the motives behind addiction and addiction's failure to provide a real alternative to contingent existence. He sees that in order to surmount contingency, one must confront the problem directly and honestly. The illusion that one has become God, achieved by Coleridge and De Quincey through the drug, is a basic datum of the American poetic experience. Burroughs' most significant achievement, however, is

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<sup>390</sup> Mottram, 29

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

having depicted a grim and absolutely honest testimony of one who has come back from the last reaches of the Romantic self. He shows us the unglamorous, quotidian aspects of addiction, which is closer not to the glorified junkie of the Nineteenth century, but to one of Scott F Fitzgerald's most important creations, the monumental alcoholic of "The Lost Decade," who exclaimed, with no small amount of self-irony, that he had been drunk for ten years.

If Burroughs succeeded in painting the reality of addiction in an unparalleled manner, it was because he refused to rely on poetic, metaphorical language. He had no use for embellishments. He wanted words to be brute forces which, once and for all, call things by their real name. This attitude echoes Roland Barthes' notion of a revolutionary political language.<sup>393</sup> Like Barthes, he was looking for a type of expression that "makes the world" (*NL*, 203) rather than merely describe it. By resorting to a strong, powerful, true language, Burroughs believed he was putting forth a philosophy of life – one in which the individual was free to experience reality *as is* and call it by its real name.

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<sup>393</sup> At various points throughout *Mythologies*, Barthes would advocate the need for a different, direct, new relationship between language and reality. He pits the countryside dwellers' proverbs against the bourgeois aphorism to illustrate that language is a material object with concrete properties and must not be used to obfuscate reality. (See, for example, *Mythologies*, op. cit., 168-9, 172)

# Waiting for the Second Savior

## Michel Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005)

### I.

In the Introduction to his *Contemporary Literary Censorship*, Michael B. Goodman writes, “The court trials and other actions against *Naked Lunch* provide a moral benchmark. We cannot fail to recognize, in retrospect, the speed with which we assimilate into the mainstream of American life that which was once unspeakable.”<sup>394</sup>

This observation is as true of Burroughs' novel as it is of each one of the works we have considered in the previous chapters, or of scandalous artworks in general. One of the most fascinating aspects of studying the controversial authors is, it seems to me, the ways in which they illustrate the evolution of societies and attitudes. By providing us with an opportunity to assess how they fare decades and centuries after their own day and age, scandalous artworks trace the intellectual history of humanity. Whether we are talking about someone who forces us to rethink literature in Antiquity, the Middle Ages or in the 1950s, we ask ourselves similar questions. What do subsequent generations of readers make of an artistic legacy which has been called scandalous in its own day and age? Do controversial writers ever become “mainstream”? If so, how do their ideas get adopted and “dissolved” into a more contemporary discourse? Can there be such a thing as a topic which remains taboo forever?

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<sup>394</sup> Goodman, op.cit., 1



The questions above are just a few of among those that can be asked with regards to the “legacy” of the five “immoral” writers we have considered in the preceding chapters. I wanted to include a sixth one, somebody who can be used as an illustration of this evolution. After much reading of contemporary French fiction, I have decided to look for answers by means of analyzing Michel Houellebecq’s last novel, *La Possibilité d’une Ile* (2005). The book provides us with great insight into these questions while simultaneously referencing – in a more or less overt manner – all five authors which we have previously considered.

Zeroing in on Houellebecq has by no means been an easy task. A high-profile author, he occupies (for reasons which, some would argue, have very little to do with purely artistic merit), a rather singular place in French letters. A master of self-promotion, he is a man who rejoices in finding himself in the midst of scandal. A great commercial success and a darling of literary Paris, he has been skillful in making people talk about him.<sup>395</sup> Some have wondered whether his novels have literary merits outside of their ability to instigate a debate. Others have openly ridiculed him and questioned his talent as a writer. To quote but one critic, Jean-Loup Chiflet: “Houellebecq est un auteur qui fait

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<sup>395</sup> Ever since he first rose to fame with his essay on H.P. Lovecraft, Houellebecq has used controversy to ensure his name is well-known to the general (and frequently non-reading) public. His antics include his proclaimed sympathy for Stalin, his opposition to abortion, his dramatic quitting of the Editions Flammarion for rivals Fayard. His open mockery of *Le Guide de Routard* and his parody of the nudist colony “L’Espace du Possible” in his second novel landed him in court. He also launched a vehement critique of Islam – carried out in exceptionally poor taste, let it be said in passing, which kept him at the forefront of attention for months. For a more in-depth look at Houellebecq’s biography, Denis Demonpion’s *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène*, op.cit. provides some excellent insights.

parler. Michel Houellebecq n'est pas un écrivain à style, mais un écrivain à thèmes. Idéal pour des dîners en ville ou les conversations de bistro ou se pratique notre sport national: parler d'un livre sans l'avoir lu."<sup>396</sup> The harshest critics attribute his eminence to his compromising literary quality and writing *romans à these*. They reproach him his adhering to a pre-fabricated, formulaic writing, his "spoon-feeding" the reader unoriginal, banal ideas, his playing with society's most basic instincts and his failing to invite independent reflection and analysis.

As this chapter demonstrates, there is some truth to all of these accusations. I myself am unconvinced of Houellebecq's first three novels' chances of withstanding the test of time despite all the discursive and judicial heat they have generated. However, as a high-profile writer, Houellebecq, much like his five predecessors, draws attention both to himself and to his oeuvre, thus answering an additional question: What precisely is the role of the author in contemporary society? Questionable chances of artistic longevity notwithstanding, there is no doubt that Houellebecq is very good at depicting and putting into words exactly how his contemporaries have turned out. To quote one better-intentioned critic,

Il annonce la couleur, qui sera pâle assurément, pâle et blême comme l'époque, éclairée aux néons des supermarchés, des galeries marchandes, des halls d'aéroport, des centres commerciaux, des parcs d'attractions, des zones commerciales périphériques, des halls d'immeuble, des rues des villes nouvelles, des plate-formes de bureaux. Pâle et blême comme cette lueur projetée sur ces centaines des milliers de visages rivés à leur ordinateur. Pale et blême comme le sont ces multitudes de dépressifs en manque

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<sup>396</sup> Naulleau: 86

d'amour, d'anxieux en quête de sens, d'exaspérés de tous poils qui hantent les cabines des psychothérapeutes.<sup>397</sup>

Decidedly, it is owing to the gift of observation and synthesis Bardolle insists upon in the quote above that Houellebecq has been so successful in striking a chord with his contemporaries. What's more, these are contemporaries who, it has been proven, have little or no use for literature. He reminds one of Bouguereau, the most extolled and commercially successful painter of the Nineteenth century. The similarities have little to do with the external characteristics of their oeuvre. Houellebecq does not display much of the technical virtuosity which characterizes Bouguereau's body of work. However, both artists are very good at discerning and responding to the trends and needs of their very volatile and capricious respective artwork and literary markets. Houellebecq has always posited himself as an author, thoroughly immersed in the concerns and preoccupations of his own day and age. He refuses to be labeled an avant-garde author at all cost and insists, instead, that he paints as accurate and elaborate a picture of the "here and now" as possible. In his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), for example, he argues that "Je ne me situe ni pour ni contre aucune avant-garde, mais je me rends compte que je me singularise par le simple fait que je m'intéresse moins au langage qu'au monde."<sup>398</sup>

The second reason behind Houellebecq's considerable commercial success is his skillful blending of a variety of literary genres, thus appealing to a larger reading audience. *The Possibility of an Island* which is, in my opinion, by far his best novel to date, combines science fiction with millennial, apocalyptic, and utopian writing. This

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<sup>397</sup> Bardolle, 56

<sup>398</sup> *Les Particules élémentaires*, 110-111

mixing of genres which fascinates and engages the reading public more than mere “classic” novels could. Without a doubt, there are finer contemporary French authors, far more skilled in their narration, more subtle in their discernment and criticism of contemporary issues, and much less abrasive in their choice of themes. None of them, however, has solicited such tremendous polemics. What’s more, Houellebecq seems inspired by the very authors whom we have seen and discussed in the preceding chapters. Therefore, he constitutes a great starting point into our exploration of how the authors we have previously dealt with “fare” decades after they reached the peak of their notoriety.

A word about Houellebecq’s take on the five authors we have already considered in the course of the present study. Four out of the five are directly referred to on the pages of *La Possibilité d’une Ile*. We don’t encounter the five nearly as often as we do Balzac and Nietzsche, whose heritage seems to be, as we would subsequently see, at the core of the narrative, still, Nabokov, Céline, Genet and Burroughs<sup>399</sup> are, quite explicitly, a part

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<sup>399</sup> For the most part, with the exception of Nabokov, those authors are evoked *in passim*, such as in the following examples which brings to mind Céline’s novel: “Depuis dix minutes j’avais horriblement envie de leur dire que je *voulais*, moi aussi, entrer dans ce monde, m’amuser avec eux, *aller au bout de la nuit*.” (*PI*, 310, emphasis mine). In other cases, they become briefly characters of the novel. Burroughs’ cameo appearance is particularly significant – and entertaining, in that respect, and deserves to be quoted in its totality. In the following episode, Daniel is talking about a movie he wants to make, “Les Echangistes de l’autoroute”. The film would successfully combine the commercial appeal of pornography and extreme violence. The Burroughs-like character appears just after a couple having sex, as well as the crew filming them in the middle of a blooming field, are shot to death in cold blood:

A la fin de la séquence, un homme gras, aux cheveux très noirs, au visage luisant et troué de petite vérole, également vêtu d’un costume croise noir, sortait de l’arrière de la voiture en compagnie d’un vieillard squelettique et sinistre, à la William Burroughs, dont le corps flottait dans un pardessus gris. Celui-ci contemplait le carnage (lambeaux de chair rouges dans la prairie, fleurs

of the novel, while Drieu La Rochelle's ideas linger in the background. Indeed, as we become acquainted with Houellebecq's protagonist at the beginning of the narrative, he appraises us of his desire to claim his place among the greatest French comedians who, "de Céline à Audiard, avait déjà fait des grandes heures du comique d'expression française." (*PI*, 58)<sup>400</sup> That five controversial writers of the not-so-distant past might be evoked in a no less controversial modern novel, much given to candid representations of sexual intercourse, brutal violence, and pitiless social critique is perhaps not as surprising - or significant - in itself. However, what seems important is that Houellebecq's writing allows us to see how the next generation as a whole – through the eyes of one of its most acclaimed writers anyway - has been marked by that legacy, and in what way the processes detected and predicted in those artists' oeuvre have evolved and come to fruition.<sup>401</sup>

Let us now turn our attention to the novel itself. *La Possibilité d'une Ile* is a book which consists of two separate but intertwining and complementary narratives. The first one is taking place in the present while the second one occurs in the future. Therefore, the

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jaunes, homes en costume noir), soupirait légèrement et se tournait pour dire à son compagnon: "*A moral duty, John.*" (*PI*, 159)

<sup>400</sup> All page numbers refer to the 2005 Fayard edition and will be given in parentheses.

<sup>401</sup> If Drieu Le Rochelle is not directly evoked in the narrative, passages such as the following one, which I have chosen for the appropriate way in which it illustrates this particular aspect of the narrative, we can still sense that Houellebecq was a misogynist in the same way as Drieu: "Comme toutes les très jolies jeunes filles [Esther] n'était au fond bonne qu'à baiser, et il aurait été stupide de l'employer à autre chose, de la voir autrement que comme un animal de luxe, en tout choyé et gâté, protégé de tout souci comme de toute tache ennuyeuse ou pénible afin de mieux pouvoir se consacrer à son service exclusivement sexuel" (*PI*, 215)

novel can be characterized as part biography, part-science-fiction. This rather unique combination of genres is in part responsible for the idiosyncratic style. Still, *La Possibilité d'une Ile* displays a number of similarities with the other novels we have considered. To begin with, its narrator and protagonist, much like those of the other books, is not a professional writer but a highly observant amateur of the writing profession. Gifted with an acerbic sense of humor, Daniel shies away from verbal equilibristic and attempts to be as honest as possible with regards to his true motives and desires. Thus, he is very different from somebody like Nabokov's protagonist Humbert Humbert. The latter is a well-educated man and a college professor of great sophistication who crafts an elaborate and fascinating verbal construction the purpose of which is to obfuscate the highly immoral nature of the events related. Likewise, Céline's narrator paints a distorted, grotesque image of reality. He does so in an inimitable farcical language, hitherto unheard of in French literature. The comedian, the erudite and the doctor, in turn, bear no resemblance to either the transgendered prostitutes, petty criminals and hardened prisoners or Burroughs' febrile drug addicts and madmen in *Naked Lunch*. What these narrators do have in common, however, is the ability to depict – vividly, convincingly, heart-wrenchingly – paradigms of existence ordinary people have little or no access to. The tone of Daniel's calm and objective narrative is closest to that of Drieu's novel, which, perhaps owing to the third-person narration's taking away some of the immediacy of the experiences related, appears less passionate and more detached. Further parallels with Drieu can be seen in some of the doctrines of the religious sect Daniel is a member of. The Elohimite teachings openly flirt with the tenets

of Nazism and eugenics and lavish praise on Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche and the German Romantic poets, dear to the protagonist of Drieu's novel as well.

The picture of the contemporary world Houellebecq paints is a grim and sinister one. It is likewise consistent with the outlook he has demonstrated ever since the dawn of his writing career. To a large extent, the key to understanding Michel Houellebecq is contained in his analysis of H.P. Lovecraft, the early twentieth century American mystery/horror writer. His essay on Lovecraft propelled him into the limelight, and we find echoes of it in each one of the subsequent works. Houellebecq the literary critic is well-attuned to his subject's affinities, and takes great pleasure in revealing his modality of radical negation, if not outright contempt and hatred for the world. The "phobias Lovecraftiennes," as he would call the horror writer's intense dislike of and aversion to everything but his most intimate family space, constitute the background radiation, as it were, to the Houellebecqian world view:

Aujourd'hui plus que jamais, nous pouvons faire notre cette déclaration de principe qui ouvre *Arthur Jermyn*: La vie est douloureuse et décevante. Inutile, par conséquent, d'écrire de nouveaux romans réalistes. Sur la réalité en général, nous savons déjà à quoi nous en tenir, et nous n'avons guère envie d'en apprendre d'avantage. L'humanité telle qu'elle est ne nous inspire plus qu'une curiosité mitigée. Toutes ces « notations » d'une si prodigieuse finesse, ces « situations », ces anecdotes... Tout cela ne fait, le livre une fois renfermé, que nous confirmer dans une légère sensation d'écœurement déjà suffisamment alimentée par n'importe quelle journée de « vie réelle »<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Houellebecq. Michel. *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*. op.cit. Henceforth referred to as *Lovecraft*, 9

Thus aggressively and openly Houellebecq appropriates Lovecraft's principle: life is hateful, and at the edge of what we perceive there lies the dark and hollow vortex of evil, the progressive consciousness of which renders life exponentially more hideous. So far so good – many great works of art have depicted the horror which everyday life and interaction with ordinary people provokes in us. What invariably surprises the reader, however, is that, despite appearances, Houellebecq believes strongly, perhaps even naively, in the author's social responsibility, as well as in literature's capacity to change the world we live in for the better: "[O]n souhaite dépasser le cynisme. Si quelqu'un aujourd'hui parvient à développer un discours à la fois honnête et positif, il modifiera le monde" (111), he points out in *Lovecraft*. Hence the important paradox which characterizes Houellebecq's writing: In the midst of all the horror, despair and negation his novels and poems abound in, you know that you are, at heart, in the presence of a *moraliste* of the French Augustinian variety (Arnauld, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld). This parallel is particularly insisted upon in *La Possibilité*, whose narrator, Daniel, is a comedian of considerable talent. The force of his sketches is such that critics who watch his performances would often compare him to Chamfort and La Rochefoucauld (*PI*, 58). Throughout the novel, Daniel himself would never tire of reminding us, in a manner similar to that employed by the other narrators we have previously examined, that his is the infernal lucidity of a thinker who sees through his subject and who cannot shake off his insights.

What seems to fascinate Houellebecq the most in Lovecraft are not the violence and horror of a phantasmagoric world but the "vérité démoniaque", the diabolical truth about everyday existence. The essay on Lovecraft aims at demonstrating that what lies



beneath the surface of the banal and the quotidian is infinitely more terrifying than the most gruesome tale. Two decades after the publication of *Lovecraft*, we see a similar artistic move in *La Possibilité*. Beneath the appearance of normalcy and the seemingly unsurprising descriptions of everyday life as it is lived by most people lies a horror story. Houellebecq's novels depict not the bone-chilling tale of the fantastic genre in *Lovecraft*, but, instead, the consternation and anguish of the here and now. It is this genuine apprehension which existence inspires in the thinking individual which allows us, I believe, to interpret *La Possibilité d'une Ile* within the framework in which we have considered the rest of the novels in this study. Much like them, it has been inspired by the terror stemming from the realization that human life, such as it is lived by most people, is devoid of meaning and characterized by torment and hopelessness. In February 1995, in an interview for the journal *Art Press*, Jounnais and Christophe Duchatelet would ask him to elaborate on what he himself has declared "l'unité ou la ligne directrice, obsessionnelle qui guide [son œuvre]". Houellebecq would spell out how his tragic view of life shaped him as an author:

Avant tout, je crois, j'ai eu l'intuition que l'univers est basé sur la séparation, la souffrance et le mal; La volonté de creuser ces notions, de délimiter leur empire, y compris à l'intérieur de moi. Ensuite, la littérature doit suivre. Le style peut être varié, c'est une question de rythme interne, d'état personnel. Mais j'ai pris la décision de décrire cet état de choses, et peut-être de le dépasser: . . . L'acte initial c'est le refus radical du monde tel quel; c'est aussi [le refus de] l'adhésion aux notions du bien et du mal."<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Art Press, op.cit., 28

Thus the larger question the novel tries to answer becomes, how are human beings supposed to redeem their existence and make sense of the suffering and pain they have no choice but to endure? Most people never find the answer, our cynical comedian would argue, because they are stupid, uninteresting and ignoble. His audience is comprised of such individuals. They pay the entrance fees *plein tarif* and laugh at Daniel's jokes, yet these people – the salt of the earth, *liant de la sauce*, as Daniel will call them, are completely devoid of personality. What's more, if Daniel has been extremely successful, it is in part because those seemingly uninteresting mediocre people have allowed him to construct his career around the bizarre fascination violence and pain hold for the West: “[L]’ ensemble de ma carrière et de ma fortune je l’avais bâti sur l’exploitation commerciale des mauvais instincts, sur cette attirance absurde de l’Occident pour le cynisme et pour le mal » (*PI*, 210). The narration is therefore a quest for meaning and redemption through the search of the forces which can effectively counterbalance the chaos and uncertainty brought about by existence. The novel is a virtuoso balancing act between three separate reflections upon things which render human life meaningful: art, love and religion. The following study is an attempt to explore the interplay between the three.

## II.

Describing despair and making sense out of meaninglessness is a tremendous challenge, but one which Houellebecq seems to undertake with gusto. After all, he makes it no secret that he considers himself fully prepared to tackle the job. From the very beginning of the novel, his narrator and mouthpiece compares himself to *un héros balzacien*. As the novel progresses, we find out that Daniel often rereads the great 19<sup>th</sup> century classic and reflects upon the ways in which society has mutated since his day and age. Towards the end of the book, immensely hurt by the end of a tumultuous and hopeless love affair, he would compare himself to one of Balzac's most memorable characters: "Je relus ... *Splendeurs et Misères des courtisanes*, surtout pour le personnage de Nucingen. Il était quand même remarquable que Balzac ait su donner au personnage du barbon amoureux cette dimension si pathétique, dimension à vrai dire évidente dès qu'on y pense, inscrite dans sa définition même" (PI, 378). There is no doubt that he sees himself in these descriptions. Self-irony aside, the references to Balzac throughout the narrative indicate that Daniel aims at achieving an in-depth depiction of his contemporaries worthy of Balzac. The big question he has to answer first, however, would be whether his own day and age lends itself to a representation in such a manner, that it is a lot more fragmented, devoid of ideals and sense than it was in the nineteenth century. Balzac's heroes inhabited a fictional world in which every sign and object was highly invested with individualizing potential. They were surrounded by an ensemble of signs and objects which constituted a meaningful – and therefore comforting – totality. As we would soon discover, Houellebecq's world is a far cry from this paradigm.

*La Possibilité d'une île* essentially revisits a classic narrative schema – the biography of an extraordinary person. We have previously established that telling somebody's life story puts the events of a lifetime in order, thereby revealing meanings and connections which one might not have noticed previously. When he first starts writing, Daniel – the narrator of the novel, seems to obey a need to express himself he does not fully comprehend. He would end up acknowledging, “l'apaisement réel mais faible, la sensation de lucidité partielle que m'apportait cette narration” (*PI*, 341). The exercise is so important, it would become a condition for adhering to the Elohimite church: “[On] eut l'idée de demander à tous les aspirants à l'immortalité de se livrer à l'exercice du *récit de vie*, et de le faire de manière aussi exhaustive que possible” (ibid).

Daniel's autobiographical narrative is accompanied by the commentary of two of his successors – Daniel 24 and Daniel 25. They are neo-humans who live according to the rules prescribed by their ancestors. They die and are reborn again, and are in this sense, immortal. However, one of the requirements for those who want to have access to immortality, is to write their autobiographies. The ability to think back and reevaluate one's life becomes, thus, the necessary condition those who want to live forever have to fulfill:

Il était recommandé aux humains d'aboutir, dans toute la mesure du possible, à un récit de vie achevé, ceci conformément à la croyance, fréquente à l'époque, que les derniers instants de vie pouvaient s'accompagner d'une sorte de révélation. L'exemple le plus souvent cité par les instructeurs était celui de Marcel Proust, qui, sentant la mort venir, avait eu pour premier réflexe de se précipiter sur le manuscrit de la *Recherche du temps perdu* afin d'y noter ses impressions au fur et à mesure de la progression de son trépas.

Bien peu, en pratique, eurent ce courage. (*PI*, 93)

After Balzac, Houellebecq would bring another great French writer into the narrative, and thus reaffirm his conviction that he must be considered along the same lines as the greatest literary geniuses of the preceding generations. And if only a few are brave enough to undertake the exercise of reevaluating their life, it is because talking about it forces one to re-live the most intense, and therefore, frequently the most painful moments of one's life. Consequently, the resulting work of art is characterized by sincerity and candor, and successfully defies the monotony and numbness which define everyday existence. The true artist must, through the sheer act of revisiting the occurrences of ordinary life, endow them with a sense they previously lacked. What's more, as the quote below illustrates, when the individual suffers, the resulting work of art would be nothing if not entirely authentic:

Toute grande passion, qu'elle soit amour ou haine, finit par produire une œuvre authentique. On peut le déplorer, mais il faut le reconnaître : Lovecraft est plutôt du côté de la haine ; de la haine et de la peur. L'univers, qu'il conçoit intellectuellement comme indifférent devient esthétiquement hostile. Sa propre existence, qui aurait pu n'être qu'une succession de déceptions banales, devient une opération chirurgicale, et une célébration inversée. [...] Offrir une alternative à la vie sous toutes ses formes, constituer une opposition permanente, un recours permanent à la vie : telle est la plus haute mission du poète sur cette terre. Howard Philip Lovecraft a rempli cette mission.<sup>404</sup>

We see, then, how the very act of writing could prove to be a life-saving activity. Towards the end of his life and his narrative, Daniel would acknowledge the tremendous

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<sup>404</sup> *Lovecraft*, 130

therapeutic value of his endeavor: “[L]e simple fait d’écrire, en me donnant l’illusion d’un contrôle sur les événements, m’empêchait de sombrer dans des états justifiables de ce que les psychiatres, dans leur jargon charmant, appellent *des traitements lourds*” (PI, 407)

Now let us take a more in-depth look at our protagonist, Daniel 1. Even though he only narrates the first half of the account, his presence is felt throughout the novel as his clone successors supply a commentary on his life experiences, re-live altered yet recognizably similar experiences and frequently draw attention to the changes which have occurred in the centuries following Daniel’s death. Daniel<sup>24</sup> and Daniel<sup>25</sup>’s narratives are important to the novel, because they bear witness to the impending changes our society is likely to go through. It is significant that, albeit full of gratitude for the legacy of their ancestor, the two clones intersperse the novel with their own commentaries and allow us a glimpse into the ways in which the human race has evolved. Daniel’s successors are used as reminders of just how meaningless and incomprehensible the emotions, priorities and attachments which seem to rule and define our existence might turn out to be to successive generations. Curiously, emotions and laughter seem to be the first characteristics humanity would be stripped of, if Houellebecq’s grim predictions are anything to go by. Writes Daniel 24: “cette subite distorsion expressive, accompagnée de gloussements caractéristiques, qu’il appelait le *rire*, il m’est impossible de l’imiter; il m’est même impossible d’en imaginer le mécanisme” (PI, 61).

In this sense, it is significant that Daniel<sup>1</sup> is a comedian, for that makes him a man belonging to a dying species. At the same time, it is also true that the comedian is the great sage of every age, the man who weeps behind his mask of gaiety and laughter,

and the one who has, in a variety of guises, accompanied humanity ever since the dawn of time.<sup>405</sup> Much like he sees himself among the greatest literary classics, Houellebecq does not hesitate to position Daniel among a score of great literary clowns.<sup>406</sup> Like the

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<sup>405</sup> See Janick, Vicki K., Editor. *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History. A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1998

<sup>406</sup> The buffoon is one of the most ubiquitous literary characters of all times. Known likewise as fools, jesters, clowns, wit-crackers, harlequins, tricksters, pranksters, etc, buffoons are a strangely homogeneous fraternity, remarkably consistent over a broad expanse of time and space. Their study has, for centuries, provided unusual opportunities to examine the common features and unexpected variations in a shared convention. The buffoon is, first of all, a typological character who has a conventional role in the arts and who gladly engages in nonsense. Fools are also a part of social and religious history; they may be individuals, often deformed, who live prescribed and marginalized lives or play key roles in the serious or mock rituals that support social and religious beliefs.

Simultaneously, as Janick and Nelson write in the preface to their *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art and History*, a study of fools informs much of late-twentieth-century critical study. Write Janick and Nelson,

First, fools are particularly significant to semiotic, poststructuralist criticism because of their focus upon language and communication. Continually functioning as evaluators of language, they point out its inevitable imprecision and the consequent fallibility of human reason. This is a premise of poststructuralist or post-Saussurean theory and virtually all other recent theories of language. Second, the fool is important in gender studies. The most significant fool in the Western culture, Erasmus's Stultitia (Folly) in *The Praise of Folly*, is female; but in most cases the fool is male, with a masculine pronoun referent. However, the dress and behavior of both male and female fools often suggest sexual ambiguity if not androgyny, while fools' individual sexuality is commonly manifested in equivocal, scatological language rather than action. Third, New Historicism gains from studies of the fool. Because the characteristics of fools in the actual world, in ritual, and in art are interrelated, a broad study of fools provides an excellent opportunity to examine the historical and social contexts that inspire artistic creation.(Janick, et.al.,op.cit., xiv)

classical “buffoon” figures which have left their imprint throughout literature, Daniel is an acute, though bitter, observer of his day and age. His laughter is, as the reader will find out no later than the third page of the narrative, strained and acerbic, and his sketches – full of hatred and despair:

Je ne veux pas dire que mes sketches n'étaient pas drôles ; drôles, ils l'étaient. J'étais, en effet, un observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine ; il me semblait simplement que c'était si élémentaire, qu'il restait si peu de choses à observer dans la réalité contemporaine : nous avons tant simplifié, tant élagué, tant brisé de barrières, de tabous, d'espérances erronées, d'aspirations fausses ; il restait si peu, vraiment. (*PI*, 21)

All of the characters in the novels we have considered are able to hide behind and be defined through their occupation or interests. The mask Humbert wears in society is that of the scholar. Gilles' is that of journalist and pseudo-intellectual. Burroughs' protagonist is a junkie. Genet's characters are transgendered prostitutes and criminals. Similarly, Daniel will constantly define himself through his being a comedian. He would frequently go as far as to insist that the comedian is, by definition, the antithesis of the humanitarian. Being a comedian is, for Daniel, much more than a profession or a calling – it is his true self. “[J]e ne pouvais pas m'en empêcher: j'étais un bouffon, je resterais un bouffon, je crèverais comme un bouffon – avec de la haine, et des soubresauts.” (*PI*, 116). Incidentally, Daniel is not the only comedian in the novel. Towards the middle of the narrative, as we become acquainted with the Elohimite sect, we will meet another “funny man”, the prophet's best friend and the highly unsuccessful director of public relations of the organization. Sarcastically referred to as “Humoriste”, he acts as Daniel's foil, and his character has been developed in order to insist upon the difference between



an ordinary lampoon, and a wise satirist. We are “treated” to some of Humoriste’s banal and unimaginative jokes, pathetic and childish plays on words which cannot provoke laughter. Unlike the narrator, self-proclaimed “vieil espion de l’humanité” (*PI*, 269), Humoriste is dismissed as “[faisant] partie de ces êtres disgraciés dont même le désespoir ne peut pas être prise totalement au sérieux”(PI, 259).

Comedy is a powerful tool of social analysis, yet it remains unsatisfactory as means of making sense of one’s reality. Writing and narration, on the other hand, are capable of achieving that. One is, of course, bound to interrogate oneself as to the place which the artist occupies in this paradigm. For all his unsuspected eloquence and successful verses, Daniel remains, essentially, a buffoon. However, he is encouraged to undertake his literary endeavor by the only real artist we encounter on the pages of the novel: Vincent Greilsamer, the Elohimite prophet’s son who succeeds him as the next leader of the cult. Vincent is an installation artist. At the beginning of the novel, Daniel treats him with no small amount of irony: “Il avait quand même exposé une fois à Beaubourg – il est vrai que même Bernard Braxene a exposé à Beaubourg. Enfin c’était un petit quart de VIP, un VIP Arts Plastiques” (*PI*, 116-7). Yet as the narrative progresses, we sense the respect and admiration Daniel has for Vincent grow. Eventually, at the end of the narrative, Daniel will credit Vincent with having been the true inspiration and actual driving force behind his narrative: “Avant de mettre fin à mon récit je repensai pour la dernière fois à Vincent, le véritable inspirateur de ce livre, et le seul être humain qui m’ait jamais inspiré ce sentiment si étranger à ma nature: l’admiration” (*PI*, 409-10).

In part, Daniel's admiration for Vincent is due to the fact that the two men are extremely different. "J'étais naturellement un homme qui connaissait la vie, la société et les choses; j'en connaissais une vision usuelle, limitée aux motivations les plus courantes qui agitent la machine humaine; ma vision était celle d'un *observateur acerbe des faits de société*, d'un balzacien *medium light*; c'était une vision du monde dans laquelle Vincent n'avait aucune place assignable, et pour la première fois depuis des années, ... je commençais à me sentir légèrement déstabilisé" (PI, 148). Daniel observes Vincent constantly and quickly becomes wise to his calm refusal to change himself so as to better adapt to his surroundings. During an outing to the beach, the two of them find themselves in the proximity of a Miss Bikini Contest (the competitors themselves described in the best tradition of the Lolita fantasy – half-waifish, half devilish and extremely sexual). Looking around, Daniel sees that the audience, the jury and the announcer are nothing but eternal *kids*, individuals, profoundly invested in a never-ending quest for pleasure. In a humorous turn of phrase, the stand-up comedian in him would remark, "[Vincent] était à peu près autant à sa place dans cette animation de plage que Samuel Beckett dans un clip de rap" (PI, 257). Yet Vincent is perhaps the only character in the novel thoroughly comfortable with himself and ready to live life on its own terms. Nothing about the world is capable of enticing him to participate in the activities his fellow-humans typically enjoy: "Nous étions dans le monde normal ... le monde des *kids* définitifs [...] Il n'y avait rien la qui put réellement inciter Vincent à reprendre sa place dans la société". (PI, 257) If Vincent destabilizes somebody like Daniel, it is perhaps in large measure due to the fact that, as a true artist, he does not feel the need to engage in a violent exchange with his surroundings. Instead, he seeks salvation in a world he has created himself.

Vincent lives in his dead grandparents' house. His home is a museum of bygone days. Daniel would constantly remark that his friend has not changed anything of the décor of the house which dates back to the 1930s. We imagine Vincent's grandparents to have been the type of *petite bourgeoisie* urban dwellers Céline heaped such vehement sarcasm upon. The house exhibits all the signs critic Robert Solomon isolates as pivotal to the definition of kitsch: "The furnishings and decorations are "cheap" (a word that often performs multiple functions in discussions of kitsch), because it is mass-produced and "plastic," because it is the sort of item that would and should embarrass someone with a proper aesthetic education."<sup>407</sup> Similarly, judging by the descriptions of the furniture and the numerous souvenirs and mementos scattered around the house, we can safely assume that Nabokov would have characterized the house as exhibiting the *poshlost*' he held in such contempt. Yet, in the basement of this very typical Parisian suburban house, Vincent has created a perfect world in which words such as love, goodness, tenderness, loyalty and happiness still have a meaning. (*PI*, 152) The installation he shows Daniel is huge and elaborate. It is characterized by eclecticism and variety, represents different corners of the world and is inspired by a various customs. Yet it is a world in which everything has its logical place, a universe characterized by eternal peace and tranquility. His works would be utterly ludicrous and devoid of any serious interest had Vincent pretended that he believed in the possibility of such a universe actually existing. This is not the case at all. On the contrary, he is fully cognizant of the retrograde overtones of his work, and of the possibility that his

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<sup>407</sup> Solomon, op. cit. 3

installation may be misinterpreted as his failure to inscribe himself within the framework of the true “modern artist”.

Let us look closely into Houellebecq’s choice to depict this particular kind of artist. Despite its being very sophisticated from a technological point of view, Vincent’s installation glorifies a world very much at odds with modern reality. “Le meilleur des mondes” contains hundreds of scintillating, comforting and attractive images. To quote the description of just one scene:

Un train entrant en gare dans une station d’eaux en Europe centrale. Les montagnes enneigées, dans le lointain, étaient baignées par le soleil; des lacs scintillaient, des alpages. Les demoiselles étaient ravissantes, elles portaient des robes longues et des voilettes. Les messieurs souriaient en les saluant, soulevant leur chapeau haut de forme. Tous avaient l’air heureux”(PI, 151).

The passage above is one tiny part of a vast visual puzzle, based around a glorified past and filled with sweet images of people getting married, celebrating, getting together as family. The settings are serene and harmonious. The lights are soothing. The whole installation radiates a sense of innocence, purity and bliss, which remind us of Robert Solomon’s definition of sentimentalist, or “sweet” kitsch: “a term of ridicule and abuse, connoting superficiality, saccharine sweetness and the manipulation of mawkish emotion. [...] fly paper for the Philistines, who in their ignorance flock to [its] sweet perfection.” (Solomon 2) While “sweet” is always a matter of opinion, there is no denying that in this installation, we are confronted with a universe characterized by eternal peace and tranquility, and from which danger, ugliness and violence are notably absent.

I'd like to argue that Vincent's installation has been conceived in order to embody a two-fold critique and refusal of the so-called "contemporary world". On the one hand, Vincent chooses to glorify a life which is completely and irrevocably gone. On the other hand, by choosing to base his art around nostalgic and renegade notions from the past, Vincent is, much like Houellebecq, likewise distancing himself from the artistic avant-garde of his own day and age. In a universe obsessed with moving forward, he chooses to eulogize the past. This is a brazen move, equivalent to him unequivocally stating that he is not at all interested in being identified with art such as it exists at his day and age and which, to quote Daniel once again, by and large extols the attractions of evil. Even though Daniel is speaking of the state of French cinema, the same can be attributed to the general state of affairs:

La reconnaissance artistique, qui permettait à la fois l'accès aux derniers financements publics et une couverture correcte dans les médias de référence, allait en priorité ... à des productions faisant l'apologie du mal – ou du moins remettant gravement en cause les valeurs morales qualifiées de "traditionnelles" par convention du langage. ... La mise à mort de la morale était en somme devenue une sorte de sacrifice rituel producteur d'une réaffirmation des valeurs dominantes du groupe" (*PI*, 49-50).

Quite categorically, Vincent refuses to be a part of these predominating values. To be sure, one is also somewhat tempted to dismiss Vincent's work as kitsch as it displays the kind of sugar-coating and idealization we frequently associate with kitsch. However, I would like to argue that, several pages before the description of Daniel's visit to the

studio, Houellebecq has warned us against being too quick to jump to that conclusion.<sup>408</sup>

The perspicacious reader will recall that, when prompted to comment upon the Elohimite prophet's skills as an artist (he is much given to painting naked women with nauseating anatomical exactitude), the painter retorts, "Tout est kitsch, si l'on veut. La musique dans son ensemble est kitsch; l'art est kitsch, la littérature elle-même est kitsch. Toute émotion est kitsch, pratiquement par définition; mais toute réflexion aussi, et même dans un sens toute action. La seule chose qui ne soit absolument pas kitsch, c'est le néant." (*PI*, 145-6)

Thus the very act of artistic creation, be it kitsch or not, becomes an act of refutation of nothingness. For Vincent, this act is also a chance to escape the violence of existence: "Je suis un tout petit enfant infirme, très malade, et qui ne peut pas vivre. Je ne peux pas assumer la brutalité du monde. Je n'y arrive tout simplement pas" (*PI*, 155). It is probably owing to this somber recognition and wholehearted espousal of his own inadequacy that Vincent would be, as we shall subsequently see, "the Chosen One." He will have the opportunity to participate actively and lead a movement which would, literally, change the world which he has found so oppressive forever.

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<sup>408</sup> Kitsch is considered a matter of opinion and a category, frequently employed to designate **somebody else's** art or taste. It is rarely a characterization we would volunteer regarding our own aesthetic preferences. Used patronizingly, dismissively or even in a derogatory fashion, it denotes artistic achievements of an inferior grade and is thought of as a superficial, much-too-easily-accessible variety of aesthetic representation. Thus, it's that much more surprising that Michel Houellebecq, an author who posits himself as anything but mainstream and conventional, would proclaim that his ambition is to create a kitsch body of work: "Idéalement, je devrais réussir à devenir kitsch. Quand c'est vraiment réussi, l'art consiste à produire de nouveaux clichés, donc si ce que je fais est vraiment réussi, cela devrait être considéré comme une source de kitsch. Oui, ça serait la vraie réussite. Un nouveau kitsch dépressif peut-être. J'ai bon espoir. (*Les Inrockuptibles*, as quoted in Naulleau, 68, 80)

### III.

The above section demonstrates that, according to Houellebecq, art is in a position to enable us to save ourselves from the constraints of conventional existence. It is a true force, capable of endowing even the most senseless of existences with meaning and beauty. Its power is comparable only to that of love, which in itself is frequently cited as an inspiring force behind artistic creation in Houellebecq's novels. The two go side by side. For example, the day Daniel understands that, despite appearances, he and Isabelle, his second wife, have never truly been united in love, his insight is prompted by a parallel with a painting. Reflecting upon Isabelle's inability to abandon herself in love and let go of her inhibitions, he would state:

[C]haque fois que je l'avais vue s'émerveiller devant l'expression de beauté plastique il s'était agi de peintres comme Raphaël et Botticelli: quelque chose de tendre parfois, mais souvent de froid, et toujours de très calme; jamais elle n'avait compris l'admiration absolue que je vouais au Greco, jamais elle n'avait appréciée l'extase, et j'avais beaucoup pleuré parce que cette part animale, cet abandon sans limites à la jouissance et à l'extase était ce que je préférais en moi-même, alors que je n'avais que mépris pour mon intelligence, ma sagacité, mon humour. Jamais nous ne connaissons ce regard double, infiniment mystérieux, du couple uni dans le bonheur, acceptant humblement la présence des organes, et la joie limitée; jamais nous ne serions véritablement amants (*PI*, 71)

Daniel would mourn the absence of unity in love until he encounters the lover who would replace Isabelle. The very instant of falling in love with Esther, the second important woman in his life, would likewise be narrated through the evocation of an artistic process.

Upon setting eyes on his future lover, Daniel – much to his own surprise, is seized by the desire to write a poem. Admittedly, he has never had the least urge to do so before. Thus, from the very beginning, we sense that, according to the narrator at least, art and love are two complementary domains. Paradoxically, they also appear to be mutually exclusive. Looking at the action-painting tape on which he first sees Esther (she is auditioning for a role in the William Burroughs-inspired pornography / violence movie he has been working on for some time), Daniel reflects: “Je connaissais les travaux d’Yves Klein, je m’étais documenté depuis ma rencontre avec Vincent, je savais que cette action n’avait rien d’original ni d’intéressant sur le plan artistique ; mais qui songe encore à l’art lorsque le bonheur est possible ? » (*PI*,172) This quote echoes the succinct observation which we read in Houellebecq’s analysis of Lovecraft: “Quand on aime la vie, on ne lit pas. On ne va guère au cinéma non plus, d’ailleurs. Quoi qu’on en dise, l’accès à l’univers artistique est plus ou moins réservé à ceux qui en ont *un peu marre*. »<sup>409</sup> Perhaps at the core of this mutual exclusivity is the fact that art and love essentially operate on the same wavelength and that their frequencies endow everyday existence with the meaning and importance it lacks otherwise.

Not all of us are able to recognize an artistic impulse within ourselves, but all of us dream of falling in love: “Quelque chose en moi savait donc, avait toujours su que je finirais par rencontrer l’amour – je parle de l’amour partagé, le seul qui vaille, le seul qui puisse effectivement nous conduire à un ordre de perceptions différent, où l’individualité se fissure, où les conditions du monde apparaissent modifiées, et sa continuation légitime », Daniel notes (*PI*, 170) as he reminisces about the moments immediately

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<sup>409</sup> *Lovecraft*, 10



preceding the meeting with Esther. Much like the artist, the person who is in love is capable of rearranging the world and endowing it with sense. What's more, when in love, one begins to live more intensely: "Pour parler de Belle je dirai simplement, sans exagération ni métaphore, qu'elle m'a rendu la vie. En sa compagnie, j'ai vécu des moments de bonheur intense" (*PI*, 169). We recall a particularly memorable scene in which the sexual rapport between the two lovers seems to mimic the artistic ideal of a work in which every element has its place. Carried away by an insatiable lust, the two often have sex in a bar they frequent whenever nobody is around. One day, the waiter interrupts them. Rather than make them feel uncomfortable, however, he simply collects the money they are giving him for the check, and leaves them to their activities. Notes Daniel, "[Il] sourit également, encaissa l'addition, et ce fut alors comme si tout était prévu, arrangé de longue date par une autorité supérieure, et que mon bonheur, lui aussi, était inclus dans l'économie du système." (*PI*, 203)

Shocking as the above scene may appear, it speaks of a type of totality, of an attempt to have elements coming together and create perfect harmony. It does, in this sense, carry over faint overtones from the perfectly arranged world which we have observed in Vincent's basement. « Tout avait l'air équilibré, à sa place » (*PI*, 152), Daniel observes in his description, with no small dose of regret, because he also realizes that this type of congruence is sadly missing from everyday life. At the same time, the scene at the bar illustrates one of the greatest merits of Houellebecq's prose - the skillful blending of the borderline vulgar with the poetic and the pure.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> This blending of registers also accounts for some of the difficulties of classifying Houellebecq's prose. Ever since the appearance of his second novel, *Les Particules Elementaires*, in 1999. *Le Monde's* Van Renterghern, describes best this ideological ambiguity:

Cynical and critical as he may be in most situations, Daniel-in-love seems to share the Romantics' belief that human beings aspire to and are transformed in the presence of a "higher power" such as love. In Esther's presence, Daniel lets go of his comedian alter-ego. If he is able to drop the mask, it is because he no longer needs the protective barrier, the defense mechanism which shields him from a world which, the reader has already discovered, is odious, cruel and terrifying. Towards the end of the novel, the two lovers spend a week in Madrid together. Esther being the great, impossible and last passionate partner of his life (she is in her early twenties and he is old enough to be her father), the whole week is described in the subdued language so frequently employed to signify doomed love. Yet, despite the impending separation, Daniel has never felt so close to another human being before. He is no longer cruel and critical, on the contrary: "Pour la première fois aussi je me sentais animé à l'égard d'autrui d'intentions charitables et amicales, j'aurais aimé que tout le monde soit heureux, comme je l'étais moi-même. Je n'étais plus du tout un bouffon alors, j'avais laissé loin de moi l'*attitude humoristique*; je revivais en somme, même si je savais que c'était pour la dernière fois" (PI, 217). Thus it seems that love is the only lofty sentiment capable of endowing existence with sense, and

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Inclassable, Houellebecq dérange, divise. Quelle est la "position" de cet écrivain venu de la gauche qui rend hommage tour à tour à Staline et à la "compassion," aux "cathos traditionalistes" et à l'eugénisme? On lui reproche d'être nihiliste, "déprimiste," "antihumaniste," pessimiste. A gauche, on le voit "communiste utopique" (*Les Inrockuptibles*) ou au contraire "flou," proche de la pensée d'Alain de Benoît et encensé par la "lepénisation des esprits" (*Perpendiculaire*) A droite, le livre embarrasse, comme en témoigne le feuilleton contradictoire paru en divers épisodes dans le *Figaro*: d'abord dénoncé comme "interminable porno-misère," puis réhabilité comme victime d'un terrorisme intellectuel de gauche. (Van Rentherghern, op.cit, 9)

the only force which can render the human beings compassionate and noble and thereby cancel out the satirist whose calling it is to point out imperfections.

A word about Esther, whose character is pivotal to the narration. The debacle of her affair with Daniel inspires him to write and ultimately pushes him to adhere to the teachings of the Elohimite sect. In a way, she is the focal point in which art, love and religion – the three great powers which endow life with meaning – come together. Therefore, it is curious to examine just to what extent Esther's character seems to have been influenced by the type of discourse and sensibility which only became possible after the publication of a book like *Lolita*. Not that Houellebecq would own up to being inspired by Nabokov, of whom he is quite critical and dismissive in general. It's worth signaling that the terms in which both Isabelle and Daniel qualify *Lolita's* author are worthy of Nabokov himself – after all, it is widely known that the Russian-American writer had very few positive things to say about his fellow writers. “Je n'avais jamais supporté ce pseudo-poète médiocre et maniéré, ce malhabile imitateur de Joyce qui n'avait même pas eu la chance de disposer d'élan qui, chez l'Irlandais insane, permet parfois de passer sur l'accumulation de lourdeurs. Une pâte feuilletée ratée, voilà à quoi m'avait toujours fait penser le style de Nabokov » (*PI*, 31), Daniel remarks, for Isabelle to acquiesce, “si un livre aussi mal écrit; handicapé de surcroît par une erreur grossière concernant l'âge de l'héroïne, parvient malgré tout à être un très bon livre, jusqu'à constituer un mythe durable, et à passer dans le langage courant, c'est que l'auteur est tombé sur quelque chose d'essentiel » (*PI*, 31). And it is precisely this « essential » aspect of *Lolita* which Houellebecq would appropriate and use to his own ends.

It is clear that, that for all the acerbity with which he treats Nabokov, Houellebecq has been an astute reader of at least *Lolita*.<sup>411</sup> The lines along which Daniel would relate his first encounter with Esther immediately bring to mind a similar passage in the earlier novel. The moment in which both men meet their beloveds for the first time, they – and we, the readers – sense that they find themselves in the presence of a higher, even supernatural, power. The circumstances they find themselves in are unexpected and, in both cases, they are overcome by a feeling over which they have no control. Though brief, the moment of the initial encounters make us feel that the rapturous and the tragic will converge, and the two narrators will fall victim of a passion which will render them irrational and ultimately destroy them. Whenever Daniel encounters Esther, he notes that, « à partir du moment où elle leva les yeux vers moi il ne fut plus question de libre arbitre, nous étions déjà dans l'étant donné. Je m'assis en face d'elle sur la banquette un peu avec

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<sup>411</sup> It is curious that, on certain topics which both authors treat throughout the narrative, we observe a reversal of the roles of sorts. Humbert Humbert, who is supposedly a serious scholar and an overall morose character, is caustic and funny, whereas Daniel the comedian adheres to a more serious, and overall more scholastic attitude. The following example, a discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis, which both Nabokov and Houellebecq admittedly held in the greatest contempt, illustrates this point. In *La Possibilité d'une Ile*, we read:

[C]haque fois que nous ressassons notre passé, que nous revenons sur un épisode douloureux – et c'est à peu près à cela que se résume la psychanalyse – , nous augmentons les chances de le reproduire. Au lieu d'avancer, nous nous enterrons. Quand nous traversons un chagrin, une déception, quelque chose qui nous empêche de vivre, nous devons commencer par déménager, brûler les photos, éviter d'en parler à quiconque. Les souvenirs refoulés s'effacent; cela peut prendre du temps, mais ils s'effacent bel et bien. Le circuit se désactive" (*PI*, 119-20). For a more general discussion of the Freudian motifs in Houellebecq's other novels, see Sabine van Wesemael, *op. cit.*, pp 99-121

la même sensation que j'avais eue quelques années plus tôt lorsque j'avais subi une anesthésie générale : l'impression d'un départ léger, consenti, l'intuition qu'au bout du compte la mort serait une chose très simple » (*PI*, 173 ; emphasis original's). In a similar vein, Humbert would recount the first time he laid eyes on Lolita, who reminds him so much of long-lost Annabel as to appear to be her re-incarnation: “[T]he piazza’, sang out my leader, and then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. [...] I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition” (*L*, 39). Both narrators talk about a moment of abandonment, an instance in which they voluntarily lose control over their actions and thoughts. One has the feeling that this moment is, in a manner of speaking, an instance of great bliss and tremendous rejoicing, perhaps in large part due to the fact that one gives up, in one brief instance, the desire to have complete control over one's life.

At the same time, *La Possibilité ...* also bears testimony to just what Lolita has been reduced to by subsequent generations. By the time Houellebecq writes his novel, Nabokov's prepubescent seductress, “token girl” for a number of similar creatures, has secured a rather firm and unyielding position in the collective imagination of readers. Sadly, we are presented with the same oversimplified and vulgar image, which perseveres in collective sensibilities. Houellebecq's take on “Lolita” is quite shallow and seems to feed off and reinforce all the popular misconceptions surrounding the reception of the scandalous novel. For example, the magazine that Isabelle, Daniell's second wife, works for, “borrows” the title of Nabokov's novel, subscribing to a stereotype which we have

come to associate with the book. The notion of Lolita, or a Lolita-like female is used in order to embody the eternal youth, desire and sexuality of adolescence. The greatness of Nabokov's novel is ignored. The Lolita phenomenon has been reduced to a banal and vulgar image. That the nymphet, an ephemeral poetic creature, is replaced by the fashion model, points out to the gross oversimplification and misunderstanding of Nabokov's aesthetic ideal. What's even more disheartening is that the age of the "Lolitas" is prudently raised by 5 years. This "precautionary measure" completely obfuscates the essence of the Lolita appeal. Nabokov's nymphet is scandalous precisely because loving and desiring her is tantamount to a crime. The girls one finds on the pages of the magazine are not the prepubescent enchantresses of Nabokov's universe but rather, a slender, vulgar and mercantile pack of young models. The monstrous lust Humbert's mistress inspired has been rendered trivial by being equated with men's eternal lust after young bodies. And as though this were not enough, women, too, have been made accomplices. We are presented with their futile struggle to retain their youthful appeal. Society at the beginning of the third millennium is preoccupied with the idea of eternal youth, and the obvious impossibility of upholding this ideal is at the root of all its misery: "[Ce] que nous essayons de créer c'est une humanité factice, frivole, qui ne sera plus jamais accessible au sérieux ni à l'humour, qui vivra jusqu'à sa mort dans une quête de plus en plus désespérée du *fun* et du sexe; une génération de *kids* définitifs." (PI, 36) Yet this is a far cry from the essence of Nabokov's novel in which youth is but one of the axes of transgression.

Even a perfunctory reading of *La Possibilité ...* reveals a novel which abounds in descriptions of naked bodies and licentious behavior. This aspect of the novel is also its

weakest and most unconvincing one. It is somewhat disappointing that, much like some of the other commercially successful authors of his generation, Houellebecq attempts to sell books by banking on his reader's fascination with the type of bedroom antics which are merely "dirty" and not truly transgressive. This unfortunate artistic choice invariably cheapens the novel and makes it sound more tabloid than highbrow literature. Houellebecq's sex scenes pale in comparison to what we have seen in some of the other novels we have considered. They are a far cry from both the exuberantly orgiastic copulation in which Divine and her lovers or various inmates engage throughout *Notre Dame des Fleurs* or *Miracle*, or the subtle, yet suggestive pages in which we are allowed a peek into what goes on behind closed doors in the Humbert household. It seems to me that the main reason why sex is so unconvincing in Houellebecq is because it has been cheapened by sloppy and voyeuristic sequences which lack the careful artistic orchestration, characteristic of Genet and Nabokov's erotica. One senses that Houellebecq is making a deliberate attempt to shock the reader by seeking inspiration in porn movies rather than in literature.

Liza Steiner's excellent book *Sade-Houellebecq, Du boudoir au sex-shop* is one of the few studies to address the representations of the sex act in Houellebecq's oeuvre and shed light over the reasons why he fails to be truly original. As the title suggests, Steiner establishes a parallel between Houellebecq and his famous 18<sup>th</sup> century precursor, whose scenes of sexual freedom and debauchery remain among the most unforgettable ones in world literature. However, as Steiner would go on to reveal, while Houellebecq appears completely involved in his narration and seems to take great relish in crafting his

descriptions, Sade's tone is that of apathy, disinterest and detachment.<sup>412</sup> This attitude allows him to maintain the distance expected of an outside observer which is also the distance the true artist insists upon. He records the events without investing himself in the acts, thus rendering the writing much more "stylized" and curiously removed from reality.<sup>413</sup> In Houellebecq, we see the reverse, he is fully invested in the descriptions. Thus, even though both narrators intersperse their novels with flows of sperm and bodily fluids, the similarities end here. Olivier Bardolle, too, senses that Houellebecq is borderline obscene as he describes and explains too much: "[Houellebecq] nous chuchote la vérité à l'oreille et la vérité révélée, même sobrement, est toujours obscène."<sup>414</sup>

Therefore, it would be safe to acknowledge that Houellebecq is not nearly as scandalous as Sade in his descriptions. What's more, it seems to me that he believes naively, almost endearingly, in the mainstream roles and relationships of the two sexes. All of Houellebecq's books feature at least one "traditional" idealized couple which provides contrast to the free-forming unions we encounter on the pages of all novels. The women in these couples invariably possess physical beauty, intelligence and, above all,

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<sup>412</sup> For more information, see Steiner, 44-60

<sup>413</sup> The Kantian notion of **disinterest** has its most direct recent descendents in the aesthetic-attitude theories that flourished from the early- to mid-Twentieth Century. Though Kant followed the British in applying the term "disinterested" strictly to pleasures, the term's migration to designate attitudes is not difficult to explain. For Kant, the pleasure involved in a judgment of taste is disinterested because such a judgment does not issue in a motive to do anything in particular. For this reason Kant refers to the judgment of taste as contemplative rather than practical (Kant op.cit, 95). But if the judgment of taste is not practical, then the attitude we bear toward its object is presumably also not practical. When we judge an object aesthetically, we are unconcerned with whether and how it may further our practical aims. Hence it is natural to speak of our attitude toward the object as disinterested.

<sup>414</sup> Bardolle, 64



compassion and understanding for their men. These qualities are usually coupled with tremendous sex appeal and readiness to satisfy their partners' most outlandish desires in the bedroom. Every novel has at least one female character like that. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Plateforme*, that woman is Valerie, in *Les Particules elementaires* - Christiane and Annabelle, in *La Possibilite ...* - Isabelle and Esther. The sheer repetitiveness of the descriptions of these perfect females leads one to believe that Houellebecq does, indeed, have a certain "ideal" in mind. He seems to be holding on to an ideal of the nuclear family and the harmony in the relationships between the two sexes (homosexual couples are curiously absent from his narratives). The presence of the perfect couples may be read as an indication that, for Houellebecq, there is a significant urge to return to the traditional family values and roles. A more in-depth look into his writing reveals that he is a lot more traditional than any of his predecessors in his analysis of traditional gender roles and arrangements. His attitude reminds us of Gilles Lipovetsky's *Le Crepuscule du devoir*, in which he makes the prediction that society would increasingly get more and more tired of the uninhibited libidinal emancipation which has characterized it since the 1960s. The sociologist rightly anticipates a return to a more traditional, old-fashioned interpretation of marriage and the importance of the couple for everyday life, which I believe is also displayed in Houellebecq's interpretations of the family.

The one obstacle to "happily forever after" stems from the fact that, for all the descriptions of ideal couples, love never lasts very long in Houellebecq's novels. After the months or even years of bliss, the two lovers are usually torn apart by a sudden and violent event, frequently the suicide of the female partner, or her falling prey to an illness

or, in the case of Isabelle, alcoholism. Curiously, these ruptures are accompanied by the women's losing their good looks. Great passionate love cannot, in Houellebecq's world, ever have a happy ending. Instead, it results in an unbearably painful separation which profoundly hurts one of the partners, but is not lived as a great tragedy by the other one.

In *La Possibilite...*, we find out that Daniel has been anticipating the end of his affair with Esther almost from the get-go. Even so, losing Esther causes him great suffering:

Ce sentiment d'attachement exclusif que je sentais en moi, qui allait me torturer de plus en plus jusqu'à m'anéantir, ne correspondait absolument à rien pour elle, n'avait aucune justification, aucune raison d'être: nos chairs étaient distinctes, nous ne pouvions ressentir ni les mêmes souffrances ni les mêmes joies, nous étions de toute évidence des êtres séparés (*PI*, 333)

What turns out to be particularly striking, however, is the extent to which Daniel and Esther's rapport turns out to be similar to some other relationships we have encountered in the course of this study. The dynamics remind one of the relationship of Humbert and Lolita, as well as Divine and her multiple lovers. In all three cases, the person in love – be it Daniel, Humbert or Divine, is ready to sacrifice anything for their lover, despite knowing perfectly well that their sentiments are not, and will never be, reciprocated. Yet they persist in their feelings and do not hesitate to endure any suffering and humiliation, inflicted upon them by their beloveds. We recall Daniel roaming around Esther's home in Madrid after her return from the US, sending her text messages, emails, offering her money and then mutely following her around until the night he kills himself. “Il s'est humilié”, Esther 31 would tell Daniel 25, sharing with him some of the information she

had found out from the narratives of her faraway predecessor. “Il s’est vautré dans cette humiliation, et de la manière la plus abjecte” (*PI*, 422). We remember that, much in the same way, Humbert would beg and plead with Dolores to be his intimate partner without ever hoping that his feelings would be reciprocated. We see Divine, ready to sacrifice anything to please the scores of ungrateful and adored men in her life. It seems to me that this topos of unrequited love in modern literature can be traced back to a novel like Flaubert’s *L’Education sentimentale*. The couples above remind us of masochistic, modern-day versions of Frederic Moreau. The latter was obsessed with a virtuous married woman for whom he willingly sacrificed his youth and future. He knew all along that he would never truly possess his beloved. What, then, makes unrequited love such a powerful literary symbol?

Romantic love seems to be a state of being all human beings normally aspire towards. It is a great and unfathomable force, which can change destinies. Darwinians, however, have had no trouble taking the mystery out of it. They tell us that when we fall in love, we are falling into a stream of naturally occurring amphetamines running through the emotional centers of our very own brains. That is why we feel exhilarated, manic, powerful, creative, suddenly grown up if we are young and suddenly rejuvenated if we are older. The ecstasy of love is located in our nerves; we get high; we speed. Eventually, owing to the chemical composition of our nerves, we become immune to the amphetamine released, then exhausted, and finally, the delirium of our free fall abates. We come down to earth. As psychologist Elisabeth Young-Bruehl explains in her

excellent article titled “Where Do We Fall When We Fall In Love?”<sup>415</sup>, what follows the period of infatuation and “high” can sometimes be replaced by a feeling of attachment, a logical continuation in which our beloved does not flare up our amphetamine levels, but in which one finds ideal conditions for daily routine. Those typically include participating in everyday life and community activities, as well as child rearing and family life. While this state of domestic bliss and contentment is, without a doubt, desired by many, it is hardly something our highly controversial protagonists aspire towards. Therefore, to employ once more the terms in which classical Darwinists consider the phenomenon, we may say that our protagonists willingly choose to distance themselves from the economy of desire and attachment. Instead, they choose the amphetamine roller coaster which characterizes human relationships in order to remain on the lookout for a permanent “high” of new love.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, however, has another compelling theory: “Specifically, [neo-Darwinists] obscure what it is in sexual passion that so often leads not to attachment but to impossibilities of attachment, whether tragic or comic or tragicomic. And they obscure what it is in attachment that is so frightening to us human beings and so frighteningly difficult, with the result that we as often fall away from love as we fall into its earthbound attachment forms”.<sup>416</sup> She goes on to suggest that, since all human beings are profoundly egotistical and self-involved, they are really only interested in themselves, even if they appear set out to love somebody else. They project their ideals and

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<sup>415</sup> Published in JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society, Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 2003

<sup>416</sup> Young-Bruehl, 280

preoccupations onto other people in an attempt to “trap” them and subject them to their own will. Writes Young-Bruehl,

This demand may be issued in a form that disguises its desire. It may come forth as: I am humbly in your service, I will do anything for you! I will lay down my life for you! There is nothing that I would not do for you! But this hope to be of service is, I think, strong in proportion to the strength of the wish that fuels it, which is that the beloved confirm the lover’s love and conform to its terms.”<sup>417</sup>

Freudian psychology likewise recognizes the egotistical and self-serving nature of sexuality, since our first pleasurable experiences are the autoerotic ones. Thus we are essentially always looking to please ourselves and frequently see the Other person as a means, an instrument which enhances the experience. Young-Bruehl suggests that it is only extraordinary men and women who are capable of finding themselves on the other side of the narcissistic, self-adoring state. Those who are fully capable of accepting, understanding and seeing the Other as their own person and not merely an extension of our own egotistic projections, are truly exceptional individuals.

It seems to me that what renders Daniel such an compelling character is that he experiences and narrates, towards the latter half of his life, this particular type of recognition and love for the Other that Young-Bruehl describes so eloquently. He recognizes the importance of Esther, and more significantly, the indispensability of the sentiment of love for someone other than oneself. Despite the pain he feels when Esther leaves him, he rejoices in his suffering, because he understands that truly loving someone

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<sup>417</sup> Young-Bruehl, 281

else renders us more human. It is that much more significant that Daniel should arrive at a recognition of the importance of being totally devoted to someone other than himself as we have known him as a complete egotist beforehand. He leaves his pregnant first wife, does not care about his only child, is shockingly indifferent to the news of his son's suicide, displays no emotion when his second wife decides to move out of their home and makes no attempt to convince her to stay. The realization of the power of love which Esther brings into Daniel's life is his first claim to extraordinariness. Suddenly, the former comedian discovers that being alive can be defined only through the unconditional and forgiving recognition of the humanity of the beloved:

Je ne voulais pas devenir un automate, et c'était cela, cette personne réelle, cette saveur de *la vie vivante*, comme aurait dit Dostoïevski, qu'Esther m'avait rendue. A quoi bon de maintenir en état de marche un corps qui n'est touché par personne ? Et pourquoi choisir une jolie chambre d'hôtel si l'on doit y dormir seul ? Je ne pouvais, après tant d'autres finalement vaincus malgré leurs ricanements et leurs grimaces, que m'incliner : immense et admirable, décidément, était la puissance de l'amour. (*PI*, 218)

Likewise, as we will discover towards the end of the novel, the acknowledgement of the sentiment of love is capable of changing destinies. Daniel's last letter to Esther, the one he sends her shortly before killing himself, would, centuries after being written, turn the lives of the two clones Marie 23 and Daniel 25 upside down. The sincerity of Daniel's writing and the lofty sentiments expressed lure them out of the Neo-human enclave and inspire them to look for the company of others. In the letter, Daniel makes no mention of his impending suicide. Instead, he writes, "d'un ton joyeux, presque euphorique" (*PI*, 423) that he has faith in their difficulties being temporary and

expressing his conviction that they would be together forever. It is this faith in life not ending, in the potential for rebirth and the chance to preserve true love forever that he has received from his Elohimite faith, and which has rendered death bearable and desirable.

#### IV.

As the sections above demonstrate, art and love are the two ways in which human beings attempt to shake off the horror of existence, and endow their days on earth with meaning and redeem their existence. Or, to put it in Houellebecq's own words,

Sous l'être humain, il y a la brute  
Configurée en profondeur  
Mais au fond de sa vie sans but,  
L'homme attend le deuxième sauveur.<sup>418</sup>

Trapped in a cruel and uncomfortable existence, Houellebecq's characters are always on the lookout for a savior, and the search for this savior frequently assumes quasi-religious proportions. Essentially, for as long as humanity has existed, religious cults of any kind have provided people with something to believe in and has thereby stirred them to follow a path which, at least in theory, should culminate in redemption from their sins. Religion provides a kind of consolation for Houellebecq's characters as well. It is therefore not surprising that a third and very important theme of the book is that of the role and function of religion.

A Twenty-first century novel is invariably written within the context of a post-Nietzschean sensibility, in which God as we have known him is dead and his function has been usurped by the artist. Relatively early in the book, Vincent spells out, in a

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<sup>418</sup> *Renaissance*, op.cit., 35



remarkably succinct and eloquent manner, the ways in which God and the artist occupy similar positions in modern society:

Avant Duchamp, l'artiste avait pour but ultime de proposer une vision du monde à la fois personnelle et exacte, c'est à dire émouvante; c'était déjà une ambition énorme. Depuis Duchamp, l'artiste ne se contente plus de proposer une vision du monde, il cherche à créer son propre monde; il est très exactement le rival de Dieu. Je suis Dieu dans mon sous-sol. (*PI*,154)

It is safe to say that all of Michel Houellebecq's novels are, to a smaller or larger degree, engaged in an act of exploration of the role of religion in our contemporary world. *Les Particules Élémentaires* is a *de facto* hagiographical narrative. It traces the life and legacy of a modern day scientist-turned-saint, whose teachings and research have essentially altered the course of humanity. The hagiography (the birth, struggle, temptation and finally conversion of a Savior) is recounted by a clone-narrator living in 2079 CE. Michel, the protagonist, is a scientist, deeply alienated from his fellow men. His research is instrumental for the eradication of humanity as we know it and the creation of a new race of immortal and asexual clones, *Homo cybernicus*. Those clones revere him as their creator, and sing his praises.

It is not hard to see that *La Possibilité d'une Ile* explores a similar science-fictional paradigm in which mankind is replaced by humanoid creatures. But while in *Les Particules* the clones have a more peripheral role, in the later novel they share the narrative responsibility with their initial forefather, Daniel. From the very beginning of the book, we are reminded of why there has been need for the development of new successors of humanity, as we glimpse into the ways in which the clones view their

predecessors. In the code of conduct known as the Teachings of the Supreme Sister, the clones are advised to “Admettre que les hommes n’ont ni dignité, ni droits, que le bien et le mal sont des notions simples, des formes à peine théorisées du plaisir et de la douleur. Traiter en tout les homes comme des animaux – méritant compréhension et pitié, pour leurs âmes et leurs corps” (*PI*, 43).

The above extract, which comes from the teachings of the new sect, is rather unequivocal about why there has been need for a new humanity. At the same time, the novel also traces the formation and evolution of a new religion in the West and the ways in which the adoption and application of new values changes humanity as we know it forever. Initially, Daniel is skeptical about the chances of a new religious order to emerge and sustain itself. Throughout the first Elohimite reunion in Herzegovina, he questions the faith of the members on more than one occasion. Eventually, however, Daniel is forced to acknowledge that times have, indeed, changed, and that the emergence and spread of a new religion is possible: “Il est vrai que les temps avaient changé, et que l’elohimisme marchait en quelque sorte à la suite du capitalisme de consommation – qui, faisant de la jeunesse la valeur suprêmement désirable, avait peu à peu détruit le respect de la tradition et le culte des ancêtres – dans la mesure où il promettait la conservation indéfinie de cette même jeunesse, et des plaisirs qui lui étaient associés” (*PI*, 348).

The promise of the Elohimite religion is a better future in which human beings, harassed and traumatized by existence, will experience full and perfect harmony. “La science, l’art, la création, la beauté, l’amour ... Le jeu, la tendresse, les rires ... Que la vie, mes chers amis, est belle”, the prophet instructs his followers. “Qu’elle est merveilleuse, et que nous souhaiterons la voir durer éternellement! ... Cela, mes chers

amis, sera possible, sera très bientôt possible. La promesse a été faite, et elle sera tenue” (*PI*, 248). When he first becomes acquainted with the teachings of the Elohimite church, Daniel dismisses them as the lunatic babble of a man with grossly inflated ego and a string of failed shots at fame and wealth. However, as he starts spending more time around the Elohimites, he starts to understand why a cult promising its followers eternal life by means of constant rebirth. The latter is achieved through a preservation of the members’ DNA. Using frozen DNA, the Elohimites who die are reconstructed within 24 hours and return to life bearing the majority of the physical and mental features of their predecessors. Depending on their generation, they are designated by a number, following their names. The Elohimite movement is poised to become the dominant religion in its day and age:

De plus en plus les hommes allaient vouloir vivre dans la liberté, dans l’irresponsabilité, dans la quête éperdue de la jouissance; ils allaient vouloir vivre comme vivaient déjà, au milieu d’eux, les *kids*, et lorsque l’âge ferait décidément sentir son poids, lorsqu’il leur serait devenu impossible de soutenir la lutte, ils mettraient fin ; mais ils auraient entre-temps adhéré à l’Eglise elohimite, leur code génétique aurait été sauvegarde, et ils mourraient dans l’espoir d’une continuation indéfinie de cette même existence vouée aux plaisirs. Tel était le sens du mouvement historique, telle était sa direction à long terme, qui ne se limiterait pas à l’Occident, l’Occident se contentait de défricher, de tracer la route, comme il le faisait depuis la fin du Moyen Age. (*PI*, 410)

The key to understanding the Elohimite religion’s pull is its luring followers who are terrified of the most natural phenomenon of human existence – aging. If Céline’s defining feature is his misanthropy, Genet’s – the extolling of crime and male homosexuality,

Burroughs' – drugs etc, it seems that Houellebecq's major preoccupation is with aging and the loss of physical attractiveness. As Daniel would bitterly reflect whenever he realizes the reasons why his young lover refuses to present him to her extremely open-minded sister, "La différence d'âge était le dernier tabou, l'ultime limite, d'autant plus forte qu'elle restait la dernière, et qu'elle avait remplacé toutes les autres. Dans le monde moderne on pouvait être échangiste, bi, trans, zoophile, SM, mais il était interdit d'être vieux, » (*PI*, 209). Houellebecq is right on track here, and his book successfully reflects a culture in which, for example, experienced and professional TV presenters are replaced by terribly unprofessional but younger ones and in which wrinkles and spots are photo shopped out of movie posters and advertisements. Our overwhelmingly ageist society is therefore quite adequately depicted.

Daniel identifies himself as a profound and unyielding agnostic. He has never been tempted to adhere to a particular belief. Moreover, he is an individual who has a hard time even understanding those who believe (regardless of what it is that they believe in). However, he is respectful of the doctrines of the Elohimite sect. Initially skeptical of what might come out of his fortuitous encounter with the adherents, the reader becomes more involved once he follows the narrator to one of the Elohimite seminars. The members of this organization believe in the second coming of the Elohim, mythical creatures who created life on Earth and who detained the secret of eternal life. The promise the Elohim have made to their followers (through the Prophet, their religious leader who represents and interprets their teaching for the adepts) is that of eternal life. Three centuries after the time of Daniel 1, the promise has been carried through. The sect members are brought back to life and the characteristics which make them unique have

all been inherited. The clones from the future resemble their ancestors physically, but, as they evolve (the two Daniel clones are 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> generation neo-humans), they begin to lose some of the traits which defined their ancestors. Some of the first traits they are stripped of are their capacity for experiencing emotions. A couple of generations into the cycle of rebirths, both tears and laughter disappear, followed by the ability to fall in love. We are quickly made aware of the fact that the clones struggle with understanding some of the basic characteristics of humanity such as they existed previously. They, for their part, never interact directly with other living creatures. Their domiciles are protected from the outside world. They can only communicate at a distance through a sophisticated network of computers and other devices.

The Elohimite religion has been able to keep its promise of eternal life because society has become very technologically advanced. Faith and science are closely intertwined. Art plays an important role as well – as a matter of fact, it has become one with science. It is no coincidence that the first great leader of the movement is an artist. When, following the prophet's sudden death, Vincent succeeds him and becomes the Elohimite leader, he starts off by making sure that art will find itself at the core of the new society. Transformation of the world and the ways in which human beings interact with one another necessarily requires a completely redefined art and science. Vincent's ascent to power unleashes the imaginative and science-fictional energy of the novel. The new Elohimite leader is a sensitive artist, much given to reflection. He is likewise a person who has never quite been able to fit in his surroundings. It is significant that it is an artist who ends up being the one making one of the most revolutionary changes humanity has ever known. Vincent's impact is illustrated by the project for the sect's

main temple. Initially designed by his father, the first prophet, it was characterized by an almost caricatural ugliness. The new project symbolizes the Elohimite's departure from vulgarity and gratuitous kitsch and their embracing of art and science. Fascinated by the new plans for the Embassy, Daniel would spare no praise in his description:

Nous étions entièrement dans les blancs, du cristallin au laiteux, du mat à l'éblouissant; cela n'avait aucun rapport avec une réalité possible, mais c'était beau. Je me dis que c'était peut être la vraie nature de l'art que de donner à voir des mondes rêvés, des mondes impossibles, et que c'était une chose dont je ne m'étais jamais approché, dont je ne m'étais jamais senti capable; je compris également que l'ironie, le comique, l'humour devaient mourir, car le monde à venir était le monde du bonheur, et ils n'y auraient plus aucune place. (*PI*, 298)

The fact that the new Embassy is unimaginable in reality is extremely important, because it has come to represent a reality, which is as of yet unattainable. Yet this artistic dream would sooner or later come true, thus ultimately making art and religion one.

Vincent is not just an artistic creator and architect but, literally, a man who engineers the race of the Neo-humans. He sketches the bodies of the people from the future. Humanity itself becomes an extension of his artistic project. The Neo-humans are modeled after a series of his highly stylized drawings, in which males and females are drawn without any genitalia. Since they are cloned from pre-existing DNA, they have no use for their reproductive organs. In the Western religious tradition, we are used to generations of artists representing man and preserving his image for posterity through imitating and celebrating God's creation. In Houellebecq's novel, however, the artist

gives birth to man directly. What *La Possibilité d'une île* seems to suggest, then, is that the artist would, sooner or later, become God.

The genius of the Elohimite church is to be found in the skillful manner in which it combines two powerful human needs – on the one hand, the striving towards immortality, and on the other, the promise of a fuller life which attracts adepts to any religion. “L’idée de l’immortalité n’avait au fond jamais abandonné l’homme, et même s’il avait du, contraint et forcé, renoncer à ses anciennes croyances, il en avait gardé, toute proche, la nostalgie, il ne s’était jamais résigné, et il était prêt, moyennant n’importe quelle explication un tant soit peu convaincante, à se laisser guider par une nouvelle foi” (*PI*, 353). At the same time, those who join a religious sect are in general people who feel incomplete, who are attempting to fill a void within themselves. This is why the Elohimites market the church as an establishment where one leads a fuller life: “[M]ême si elle se base fondamentalement sur une promesse de vie éternelle, une religion augmente considérablement son pouvoir d’attraction dès lors qu’elle semble pouvoir proposer dans l’immédiat une vie plus pleine, plus riche, plus exaltante et plus joyeuse” (*PI*, 361)

It is, however, noteworthy that the clones who owe their existence to the Elohimite sect, in which research on the possibilities of DNA preservation and reproduction was funded by the hope and faith of the members, are completely incapable of understanding religious fervor. It figures among the multitude of characteristics of humanity which have been lost through centuries of cloning. Let us see what the remaining ones are:

Pas davantage nous ne pouvons comprendre l'excitation de la chasse, et de la poursuite des proies; ni l'émotion religieuse, ni cette espèce de frénésie immobile, sans objet, que l'homme désignait sous le nom d'*extase mythique* (PI, 42)... La bonté, la compassion, la fidélité, l'altruisme demeurent donc près de nous comme des mystères impénétrables, cependant contenus dans l'espace limité d'un chien (PI, 77)

*La Possibilité d'une Ile* marks a watershed in Houellebecq's attitude towards religion. In the earlier novels, he has been dismissive at best, frequently poking fun at it and presenting it as nothing but a social construct which provides the satirist with yet another opportunity depict his fellow men as caricatures. In the case of the Elohimites, however, there is a new element – that of religion, or more precisely, faith in something, being something humans can be admired for. Observing the sect members listening to their leader, Daniel finds it hard to be his usual derisory self. Instead, he is seized with something closely resembling awe and admiration. Consequently, he experiences a rare moment of suspended judgment: “Je croyais pourtant avoir des êtres humains une bonne connaissance générale, mais elle n'était basée que sur ses motivations les plus usuelles: eux avaient la foi, c'était nouveau pour moi et cela changeait tout.” (PI, 287) It is as though, in the attempt to experience something particular, stronger, different, removed from ordinary human existence, Daniel considers the possibilities that having faith hold for the first time. About a year after he initially experiences the appeal of the Elohimite movement, Daniel is shocked to see his ex-wife Isabelle taking the decision to become a member. She wills the entirety of her possessions in return for the safeguarding of her DNA in light of a possible future “reincarnation”. For the first time he understands that, while traditional religions are experiencing a rapid decline in the West, human beings



nonetheless have a great and heartfelt need to adhere to a movement, to believe in something. Written in a time in which Christianity is experiencing a rapid decline in Western culture, *La Possibilité d'une Ile* manages to re-introduce the possibility that is the essential promise of every religion –immortality of the soul. This immortality is, of course, something we are all unconsciously striving toward. It seems as though human beings are once again ready to believe in a new Savior, and, strange and inconceivable as the idea may appear initially to the well-trained skeptics of the Twenty-first century, Daniel manages to spell out this need.

If the Elohimite church and teaching constitute a logical and expected step in human development, what are we to make of the unexpected ending of the novel? Daniel<sup>25</sup>, the obedient and disciplined narrator, critical of all deviations from the norm and uncomfortable around any overt displays of affection on the part of his female correspondents, appears to be a most predictable and dependable chronicler of his day and age. He seems highly unlikely to venture outside of the prescriptions of his religion, spelled out by the Supreme Sister. He appears thoroughly content with his lot, which he describes as a life of perfect serenity:

Selon la Sœur suprême, la jalousie, le désir, et l'appétit de la procréation ont la même origine, qui est la souffrance d'être. C'est la souffrance d'être qui nous fait rechercher l'autre, comme un palliatif; nous devons dépasser ce stade afin d'attendre l'état où le simple fait d'être constitue par lui-même une occasion permanente de joie; où l'intermédiation n'est plus qu'un jeu, librement poursuivi, non constitutif d'être. Nous devons atteindre en un mot à la liberté d'indifférence, condition de possibilité de la sérénité parfaite (*PI*, 367)

Yet, one day, this well-adjusted Neo-human ups and quits the enclosure in which he was supposed to spend his days on Earth. Accompanied by his faithful dog (the only creature capable of unconditional and unswerving love), he sets off on a journey. The journey, be it literal or spiritual, has, to be sure, been a central metaphor in most of the novels we have considered so far. Lolita and Humbert's cohabitation is an infernal road trip. Bardamu goes around the world and to the end of the night. Burroughs' protagonist takes on a voyage inside the warped psyche of the addict. The initial and most important act of every journey is, of course, that of leaving, of the symbolic departure. When Daniel 25 leaves his compound, his ultimate goal is to join other renegade clones and bands of wandering lesser beings, disdainfully referred to as Savages and distinguished by their humanity. These people are the ones who never joined the Elohimite cult and were, instead, left to procreate and live life as they had for centuries before the sect came around. His decision to quit the system is inspired by a similar need for a more intense experience. He has been tempted by the last words his favorite correspondent, Marie<sup>23</sup>. She has quit her own lodgings in New York and set off in search of a new life outside of the security of the gates. What's striking is that she has been driven by an impulse which we, as humans, would readily recognize: the strife to live a fuller, more exciting life: "Je ne sais pas exactement ce qui m'attend", she would confess simply, adding, "Mais je sais que j'ai besoin de vivre davantage" (*PI*, 375). Those two sentences contain perhaps the key to understanding the novel. They stand for the ultimate irony of human and new-human existence. Centuries after the seemingly fantastic goal of attaining virtual immortality has been achieved, the immortal New-humans are unhappy with their lot. They strive to return towards the very society which their ancestors so desperately tried to

change. Thus, it would be quite accurate to say that after all the centuries of progress and work towards accomplishing the Elohimite ideal, and making sure that the predictions come true, Daniel's last living clone abandons all achievements and security of his position. He is pushed forward by an emotion which is purely human, and by an urge which we can completely understand – loneliness and the desire for human contact. It is as though history has come full circle, and the desire to be surrounded by others has once again proven to be the most powerful human instinct. Daniel<sup>25</sup> is able to sum up the urge in a succinct sentence. Speaking of Marie 23's decision to leave and of Esther 31's implicit support of her departure, he notes that, even though they themselves were genetically incapable of desiring another being, they felt “une nostalgie du désir, l'envie de l'éprouver a nouveau, le désir d'être irradiées, comme leurs lointaines ancêtres par cette force qui paraissait si puissante” (*PI*, 416).

## V.

When I first became acquainted with his work, I was reminded of Bouguereau, the most extolled and commercially successful French painter of the Nineteenth century. The similarities have little to do with the external characteristics of their oeuvre. Houellebecq does not display much of the technical virtuosity which made Bouguereau famous. However, both exhibit significant skill in discerning and responding to the trends and needs of their very volatile and capricious artwork and literary markets, respectively. In reflecting upon the link between kitsch and science-fiction, I came across John Canaday's assessment of the French painter, featured in his now-classic textbook on modern art: "The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between conception and execution. The trouble with Bouguereau's perfection is that the conception and the execution are perfectly false. Yet this is perfection of a kind, even if it is a perverse kind."<sup>419</sup> Paraphrasing this apt and succinct observation, I think it would be safe to say that the greatest merit of "Houellebecq's kitsch" lies in its ability to reference an idealized all-of-a-piece version of humanity which is problematic and perhaps exaggerated, but ultimately, compellingly and disarmingly human.

The world of literature has undergone some major changes between the times of Céline and those of Michel Houellebecq. The former caused scandal by displaying overt hatred for his fellow-men and by sparing no detail when describing the pettiness and

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<sup>419</sup> Canaday, op. cit, 154

futility of their existence. Seven decades after *Voyage*, similar observations would shock nobody. Neither would graphic renditions of substance abuse or the pangs of desire for the nubile bodies of overly-sexualized teenage girls. Indeed, all of these elements are present in *La Possibilité ...*. What has changed is the fact that those “escape vaults” which the protagonists of the earlier novels disposed of and could use as means of counteracting the meaninglessness of existence, are unavailable in Houellebecq’s times. Devoid of shock value, they can no longer be incorporated into the artistic discourse. Yet, for all the gratuitous access to sex, drugs and satirical abuse of our fellow-men, Houellebecq’s characters seem to display the same discomfort and malaise which define existence for the characters of the previous novels we have considered. Drieu, Céline, Genet, Nabokov and Burroughs steer their protagonists along a path of indulgence in a variety of immoral and socially unacceptable practices, because they had no respect for the value system of a society they largely despised. Houellebecq, in turn, seems to believe that the only way to combat the suffering life causes the thinking individual is to hope that, in the future, humankind would evolve into a more advanced type of humanity, one which would be devoid of and hence immune to the useless emotions at the core of our pain. However, centuries after this dream has come true and the Neo-humans have come into existence, we find that the aspirations and desires of the clones have remained essentially unchanged. Much like the people whose improved and perfected version they were supposed to be, they strive towards something else, something more, something which would render their tenure on Earth more meaningful. It seems to me that the true merit of Houellebecq’s novel lies in his ability to re-state old truths in a new and original way: All human or humanoid beings experience disappointment in the way they live their lives.

Yet those same beings return to seek salvation in the only two great powers which endow life with meaning – art and love.

## Afterword

“The journey is the reward”

Chinese proverb

At the beginning of this study, we set off with Bardamu, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s protagonist, on a voyage through the hell of war and human relationships. In *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, we discovered people so evil, base and despicable, that the most desirable state of affairs appeared to be the possibility to escape as far away from them as possible. Céline effectively reminded us of Jean-Paul Sartre’s immortal adage that “Hell is other people.” In *La Possibilité d’une île*, a novel which appears seven decades later, the ideal state of isolation and solitude appears to have been attained. We discover a semi-human protagonist who seems to have managed to live in perfect harmony and tranquility, accompanied only by his dog. Paradoxically, our trajectory concludes upon the image of Daniel 25, Michel Houellebecq’s narrator, who abandons the security and solitude of his Neo-human abode. He sets off in search of the very same people Bardamu so desperately tried to escape. It seems as though we have come a full circle.

The above trajectory is, to be sure, a rather simplified one. Yet the six authors we considered took us on a journey through almost a whole century of European history. Therefore, it would be appropriate to conclude this study while evoking the *topos* of the journey, a theme, common to all the novels. *Voyage au bout de la nuit* presents a protagonist, thoroughly disillusioned by the senseless violence of World War One and the realities of the times of peace, which follow it. His journey takes us, figuratively, to the end of the night of humanity. It unveils a world, characterized by stupidity, violence and

baseness. Bardamu, the narrator and guide through this hell on earth, communicates eloquently his disgust and disillusionment with the way people live their lives. Reading the novel, one cannot shake off the impression that human existence is vile, pointless and despairing. This sentiment is reinforced by the second book, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's semi-autobiographical novel *Gilles*. Between Céline's and Drieu's accounts, we obtain a rather comprehensive picture of the extreme-right's outlook on French society in the 1930s.<sup>420</sup> Both authors are prominent intellectuals who fought in and survived World War One. Therefore, they were in a position to reflect upon the realities of the battlefield, as well as the facts of civilian life which succeeded the war. *Gilles*, which is in many ways a *roman à clés*, chronicles the decades between the two World Wars. Its eponymous protagonist's journey is a search for meaning. Gilles explores the possibilities of having more intense experiences and living a more meaningful life. Thus, he is looking for an alternative to existence such as it is experienced by most people. He finds it in the heroism which war makes possible, as well as in the abandonment in love. Ultimately, he embraces the ideology of Fascism, because he sees it as a force which successfully counterbalances contingent existence.

Jean Genet's characters would take us on a journey through the 1940s. They, too, are driven by a quest for meaning. For them, the alternative consists in either crime or orgiastic sexual deviations. *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* constitute a

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<sup>420</sup> For an equally compelling, comprehensive picture of the left-wing writers' rendition of France. Henri Barbusse's 1916 novel *Le feu* would be the counterpart to Céline's novel. Other left-wing writers of the same period include Georges Duhamel, who was a Sergeant during World War One, Roger Martin du Gard and Jules Romain. Their novels painted comparable accounts of the War, and the experience of surviving it and returning to civilian life.



well-calculated offense against conventional morality. The choice to praise those who deprive others of their lives and their personal property is, to be sure, the most serious insult against bourgeois sensibility. Yet, much like the mechanisms for a more intense existence provided by love and war, a life of crime enables one to demonstrate disregard and downright disagreement with the established norms in a society, deemed stifling and oppressive. *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose* are filled with descriptions of magnificent, awe-inspiring criminals, carried out in mesmerizing classical language. Genet's writing stems from a long tradition novels which subvert religion and use religious rhetoric and symbolism in order to extol deviant behavior. Genet's novels signal an important change of sensibilities: worshipping crime and sexual deviation usurps the place, previously reserved for the praise of God.

In the 1950s, our journey migrates to America, a continent we have already discovered in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. We become intimately acquainted with it as we follow Humbert Humbert and his pre-pubescent lover Lolita on their trip across the United States. Nabokov's novel is perhaps the best-known book of the lot. It tells the story of a monstrous crime, all the while successfully illustrating another theme, common to all of the works. Through the spell-binding narrative presented by Nabokov's devious and well-spoken protagonist, *Lolita* allows us to experience the intimate relationship between transgression and the work of art. The novel immerses us in a state of being in which conventional interpretations of morality are no longer valid. By letting us into the "states of being where art's the norm," Nabokov allows us to consider the possibilities of being a part of a thoroughly different reality. *Lolita* and *Naked Lunch*, the two American novels in this study were considered so detrimental to public morals that they had to

undergo obscenity trials. The two give us a portrait of society, carried out from the point of view of the sophisticated pedophile and the desperate junky, respectively. They lure us into worlds we have no access to, and prove to us, through the virtuosity of the narration, that we are capable of rejoicing and reveling in the descriptions of profoundly disturbing reality.

Finally, Michel Houellebecq brings us back to a very recognizable reality, and an existence which is quite similar to our own. In Daniel's narrative, we recognize an existence, characterized by alienation and the dubious values of a society, immersed in consumerism and a futile quest for eternal beauty and youth. We also see an artistic sensibility, profoundly shaped by the reading of all previously considered authors. In *La Possibilité d'une île*, human beings as we know them come to an end and are replaced by asexual clones. Paradoxically, these clones are overwhelmed by a very human sense of meaninglessness and futility of existence. They exhibit the same yearning for something more which has characterized the works from the period between 1930 and 1960. In this sense, even though Houellebecq's novel does not belong chronologically with the remaining works, it is a part of our study. It treats essentially the same problem: how to endow life with sense and purpose.

The journey is, then, a theme all works have in common. Much more than a literal displacement, it is of course a metaphor for the knowledge of the self one acquires through life's travels. "The only journey is the one within," Rainer Maria Rilke writes. All six authors seem to share this point of view. Even though the novels are not exhaustive enough to be called biographies, they are intimist portraits of extra-ordinary individuals which subvert and test the limits of traditional genres such as the biography

and auto-biography. As a result, the novels read like mad contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman*. They attempt to demonstrate what it means to “come of age” in a world, shaped by the heritage of the World Wars, and defined by consumerism, dissolution of the family and traditional values, absence of religious consciousness, as well as an overall sense of purposelessness and heightened sexual frustration. The narratives reflect the changes that the novelistic genre has undergone as a result of these changes on the sociological level. The narratives are fragmented, much is left unsaid and up to the reader to decipher and put together. The variety of literary devices used is truly fascinating. From Nabokov’s clever puns and word games to Genet’s and Houellebecq’s pseudo-hagiographical narrative, to the striking literalness of Burroughs’ expression to the satire and allegorical representations all works share, these works constitute some of the richest, most sophisticated creations of contemporary literature.

Finally, these works share a fascination with evil. Their protagonists often engage in ignoble and reprehensible types of behavior. They demonstrate disregard of established societal norms. They transgress the limits of conventional morality. Scandalous, gloomy and despairing as these works may appear, however, their purpose is not to criticize their day and age through the negative representations of reality. These novels manage to depict a precise picture of existence while sounding anything but didactic. Finely attuned to the falseness of inflated rhetoric, the authors refuse to preach. On a number of occasions, they insist that they are not moralists, but accurate scribes and recording devices. For the most part, their approach to reality is characterized by a quasi-scientific precision (Genet’s novels provide us with the only exception.) They allow us to recognize and dwell in a perfectly horrifying reality, one which had been recognized by the

prominent thinkers of the 1930s. In 1935, Husserl pronounced the European nations “sick” and, in his tone reminiscent of that of the intrepid and experienced physician, called for a “medicine” to restore the “genuine, healthy European spiritual life.”<sup>421</sup>

The authors we have considered within the framework of the present study did not look for this miraculous medication. They did not believe that there had been or could be much potential for a “genuine, healthy European spiritual life.” In heightening our awareness of our own condition as human beings, in forcing us to think and reflect upon our circumstances, they simply obliged us to confront existence in all its wretchedness and evil. They did so, because they believed that life, much like the “evil” novels they wrote, should be experienced *on its own terms*. In fact, this parallel between creative activity and world affirmation had already been established. In the section titled “From the Soul of the Artists and Writers” in the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: “Art has taught us for thousands of years to look upon life in every shape with interest and desire and to bring our feelings to the point where we finally shout: ‘However it is, life is good.’”<sup>422</sup> This, it seems to me, is the essence of the immoral writers’ celebration of life: No matter how gruesome, terrifying, evil and despairing, life is always worth living.

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<sup>421</sup> Husserl, op. cit., 270, 290

<sup>422</sup>Quoted in Rampley, Matthew, op. cit., 181

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