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# Becoming visionary: Reading and living in the existential mode

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**Becoming visionary: Reading and living in the existential mode**

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University of New Hampshire, 1994

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BECOMING VISIONARY:  
READING AND LIVING IN THE EXISTENTIAL MODE

BY

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Dissertation

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
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in  
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Date

Things are because we see them, and  
what we see, and how we see it,  
depends on the Arts that have  
influenced us.

---Wilde, "The Decay of Lying"

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To My Wife Ann  
Whose Love and Support Made This Project Possible

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ABSTRACT

BECOMING VISIONARY:

READING AND WRITING IN THE EXISTENTIAL MODE

by

Michael Reardon

University of New Hampshire, September, 1994

This study identifies, defines and analyzes a sub-genre of modern Anglo-American fiction distinguished by the presence of "visionary" characters, who possess the ability to see acutely into the contingency and anguish of the human condition in this world rather than--as with the popular conception of "visionary"--our potentialities in another. Their experience of vision flows from an "existential moment," a type of epiphany which discloses the essential Nothingness that exists beneath the systems, structures, attitudes and assumptions through which we attempt to order our daily lives. Most importantly, the visionary's heightened consciousness leads to an existence defined by individual choice, responsibility for oneself and toward others, and passionate commitment to the pursuit of Sartrean authenticity--and as such marks an ontological evolution from the "quotidian," a state of "bad faith" characterized

by "blindness" to the unsettling truths with which the visionary confronts us. It is my contention that visionary characters, who are invariably themselves readers, enact paradigmatic possibilities for being for their readers, and in so doing, demonstrate art's most essential function: the ability to rouse the faculties to act.

This study deals with, in order, five texts: Ivor Winter's "The Brink of Darkness," Miss Lonelyhearts, Irwin Shaw's "Act of Faith," The Voyage Out and Lord Jim. The study's frame of "Brink" and Lord Jim provides a contrast between a character who recoils from the implications of vision and one who comes to be defined by his pursuit of them. ML and "Act" demonstrate the coherence of visionary narratives through the juxtaposition of a modern masterwork and a relatively obscure short story. Finally, Voyage, in reflecting the perspective of a woman visionary, offers perhaps the most intense experience of vision in the study.

CHAPTER I

THE CONSEQUENCES OF READING

"That is the question...How to be!" (Conrad, Lord Jim)

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,  
and that is suicide." (Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus)

The goal of this study is the identification, definition, and analysis of what I feel to be a significant subgenre of modern fiction which portrays characters I call "visionaries." While the thematic and formal similarities of these disparate texts are in themselves compelling, their true value and power, I will argue, lie in their depiction of the problem of and strategies for attaining authentic being within an existential universe<sup>1</sup>.

Now, having at the outset placed equivocal terms like "visionary" and "existentialism" on the table, I realize definition is essential. My primary goal in this chapter, however, is to establish a conceptual, historical, literary and ethical framework for the analysis of visionary

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<sup>1</sup>By "authentic being" I mean, first, that we are what we choose, or to look at this from the other end, we are the sum of our decisions. This is not to state something equivalent to, say, the United States Army's recent recruiting slogan, "Be all that you can be," which implies the presence of a kind of ontological blueprint which the individual can either choose to fulfill or not. Rather the experiences adumbrated in visionary texts show authenticity to be contingent on freedom. As John Macquarrie summarizes the point, authentic individuals "become truly themselves only to the extent that they freely choose themselves." This freedom, I will argue, results from two prominent manifestations of visionary experience: the question and the existential moment. Such freedom is also as rare as it is frightening. I hope to make this point most clearly through a consideration below of one small, dark corner of the Holocaust.

I would also point out the cogency of the concept of authentic being in our everyday lives. For example, the emergence over the past decade of the Hip Hop culture and rap music is spoken of as a desire for "authenticity" among black inner city youths. The best example I have encountered recently was the observation that Vice President Albert Gore is who George Bush would be if the former President were "authentic."

characters. This frame begins with two "existential" questions which visionary texts address and which visionary heroes answer. The first of these--"how to be?"--appears in Lord Jim (1900) and epitomizes the profound ontological displacement caused by the social, economic, and scientific changes of the nineteenth century while simultaneously acting as prologue to the existential tenor of the twentieth. It will be recalled that in that passage the portentous Stein, in responding to Marlow's request for guidance in relation to Jim, is offering an imprecise paraphrase of Hamlet's meditation on suicide: "Ja! Ja! in general, adapting the words of your great poet: That is the question...How to be! Ach! How to be!" (199). Stein's linguistic awkwardness and consequent "adaptation" is a conscious move by Conrad to invest Jim's quest for identity with archetypal and personal<sup>2</sup> significance. In doing so the second frame question is also prefigured: Camus's philosophical imperative (if I, too, may adapt)--"whether to be"--which opens The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) <sup>3</sup>. Stein's and

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<sup>2</sup>Conrad, too, with English as his third language, was prone to the infelicitous phrase.

<sup>3</sup>Conrad himself attempted suicide by placing a gun against his breast and pulling the trigger. He survived only because the bullet missed his heart by a fraction of an inch. See chapter five for context. The opening of Camus' work reads:

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest--whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories--

Camus's questions delineate an ominous progression. Yet does not the setting of Camus's query--the Europe of 1942--stand in bleak testimony of the utter seriousness, the very appropriateness, of that grim question as well as of our collective failure to adequately answer Stein's question? Indeed, given this century's unabated appetite for genocide and social disintegration, Camus's is perhaps the only serious philosophical question that can be asked in our time and completes the existential "frame" which the visionary characters I will analyze inhabit.

The question of "how to be" is also implicit in this chapter's title, which is intended to suggest a complementary thesis which will inform my discussion of visionaries. As befits an analysis which will draw heavily upon the themes and ideas of existentialism, this underlying thesis has a personal cast which I want to acknowledge at the outset. My motivation in undertaking this topic is to reflect upon the connections between the hours of my life engaged in reading and in teaching and writing about what I read, and the rest of my life in the world of women and men and events; to investigate the possible links between any consciousness engaged with a literary work and the moral quality of an individual's existence beyond that text; in a phrase, to examine whether the study of literature is, can be, or even ought to be

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comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer."

ethically "profitable." In a sense, I am carrying I.A. Richards' bold (and, many today would argue, naive) contention that literature "is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos" a half-step further by suggesting that our most ethically valuable critical responses are those which apprehend the literature which confronts and responds to the question of "how to be" in a universe devoid of moral absolutes.

To be sure, the question of the affective nature of literature has been addressed by others. Plato, through his banning of poets from his Republic, ironically lent a powerful eloquence to literature's ability to affect human conduct. In the sixteenth century, Sidney defined the object of poetry to be "to teach and delight (in order to) move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight, they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved" (Abrahms, 480). Indeed, he saw knowledge's purpose as its ability "to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls...can be capable of." And the highest form of knowledge, in Sidney's view, was "knowledge of one's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only" (Abrahms, 481, emphasis mine). In the seventeenth century, Ben Jonson's "Epistle Prefatory" to Volpone unabashedly claims as the "principal end of poesy" the desire "to informe men, in the best reason for living" (Booth,

231-32). And in the eighteenth century, Matthew Arnold wrote, "One must...be struck more and more the longer one lives, to find how much in our present society a man's life each day depends for its solidity and value upon whether he reads during that day, and far more still on what he reads during it" (Booth, 264).

We can cite, too, testaments from writers' personal experience in gauging the ability of literature to offer psychic counsel and spiritual rejuvenation. Indeed, Saint Augustine, one of the most influential predecessors of the modern existentialists, is finally converted from his dissolute life when he hears

a voice, as of a boy or a girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; Take up and read." Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should find....I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence. No further would I read; nor needed I; for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away (VIII, 131).

Through his act of textual interpretation, and particularly through his application of his reading to the chaotic welter of his life, Augustine's experience offers a microcosm of visionary experience. During the Victorian Age, the

dislocating effects of the ascendancy of the city and the factory and the disconcerting ramifications of the higher criticism of the Bible, witnessed the emergence of the temporal writer as spiritual guide; the artist supplementing if not supplanting the priest. Essayists like Carlyle, Ruskin, Cardinal Newman, and Arnold played a tangible role in helping the reading public to confront and deal with profoundly disturbing ontological questions. Perhaps most famously, Tennyson epitomized the subgenre of the spiritual autobiography in In Memoriam by asking and working through the existential shock implicit in his perception of a universe heedless of human destiny. Nature has lost the nurturing benevolence perceived by the Romantics and has evolved into a mechanistic indifference: "I bring to life, I bring to death;/ The spirit does but mean the breath:/ I know no more." However, the experience of John Stuart Mill is perhaps most pertinent to my discussion. His spiritual autobiography recounts being trapped in a "dry heavy dejection" brought on by his assiduous Benthamite training whose object was "to be a reformer of the world": for "the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream." In what he assumes to be a passing funk, Mill asks himself what Dostoyevsky elsewhere calls "an accursed question," those with the capacity to challenge the very core of our lives: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to could be completely

effected at this very instant; would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" When he can only answer "no," his momentary melancholy devolves into a consuming despair: "The fountains of vanity and ambition seemed to have dried up within me, as completely as those of benevolence."

For reasons which will later become apparent, it is worth noting that during his depression, Mill was able to function quite well in his daily life:

During this time I was not incapable of my usual occupations. I went on with them mechanically, by the mere force of habit. I had been so drilled in a certain sort of mental exercise that I could still carry it on when all the spirit had gone out of it.

As his depression endures, he contemplates Camus's question, which evolves directly from his asking himself "How to be?": "I frequently asked myself if I could, or if I was bound to go on living, when life must be passed in this manner." It is here, on the brink of the abyss, that Mill encounters "a small ray of light": J.F. Marmontel's Memoires. Prior to this, Mill's attempts to find solace and direction in literature had been in vain. But now Marmontel's narrative of his family's own desolation and his role in rescuing them sparks an empathic response in Mill, the engaged reader<sup>4</sup>: "A vivid conception of that scene and its feeling came over me, and I was moved to tears." Mill is again able to feel, and slowly, inexorably he begins to break free of the desiccating grip of

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<sup>4</sup>The idea of an "engaged" or "committed" reader will assume increasing importance to my argument. For a working definition, see pages 11 and 38.

utilitarian analysis, a process which culminates in his rereading of Wordsworth:

"What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of" (Abrahms, pp.1066-1074).

What I wish to stress at this point is the importance of the individual's--if I may posit Mill's experience as a paradigm--discovering the medicinal text which will effectively minister to his or her psychic needs. Now I hasten to point out that this is not to advocate a kind of bibliotherapeutic, text-as-magic-bullet stance regarding reading and living; however, I am trying to establish through these various citations and examples two key points: first, the efficacy of literature, indeed, perhaps its integrality, for our living moral lives--by which I mean lives characterized by personal reflection, social connection, and perseverance in the face of the omnipotence of entropy--and, second, the special efficacy of certain texts and characters--specifically, those I designate below as "visionary"--in addressing specific problems endemic to human experience. Kenneth Burke has written: "A work is the strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often mutatis mutantis, for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude towards it"

(259). The enduring human problem depicted in visionary literature is that of constructing a moral life in an existential universe, and the visionary hero is that character who offers paradigms and even strategies for confronting that problem.

Certainly some modern and contemporary critics have recognized the connection between reading and living. That the primary fruits of literary study were ethical rather than theoretical in nature had, until the past twenty years, always carried substantial credibility. In the introduction to his Three Philosophical Poets (1936) George Santayana writes

The sole advantage in possessing great works of literature lies in what they can help us to become. In themselves, as feats performed by their authors, they would have forfeited none of their truth or greatness if they had perished before their day. We can neither take away nor add to their past value or inherent dignity. It is only they, in so far as they are appropriate food and not poison for us, that can add to the present value and dignity of our minds. (5)

Burke's article cited above, entitled "Literature as Equipment for Living," suggests an even more pragmatic end for literature, a "sociological criticism," by which he means one which would

codify the various strategies which artists have developed with relation to the naming of situations....(It) would derive its relevance from the fact that it should apply both to works of art and to social situations outside of art....(It) would consider works of art, I think, as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands and instructions of one sort or another (260-62).

Indeed, Louise Rosenblatt speaks of "aesthetic transactions" between reader and text in which the reading act is motivated by a desire in the reader for something to "carry away": moral guidance, wisdom, direction. Paul Hunter concurs with this, noting that while "none of us would rationally decide to turn our personal decisions over to novelists.., the desire for instruction (usually a little disguised) still remains one of the most powerful motives for reading novels or autobiography or history, or for seeing films" (269). John Gardner has further observed: "No one seriously doubts that...ideals expressed in art can affect behavior in the world, at least in some people some of the time" (27). More boldly, Wayne Booth argues that "anyone who conducts honest introspection knows that 'real life' is lived in images derived in part from stories" (228). And Gary Saul Morson asks where but in novels we are to discover "situations rich enough to educate our moral sense....The entire impulse of novels is to provide just such information, as 'thickly' as possible. Ethics is a matter of prosaics, and great prose develops our ethical sense" (526).

Most rigorously, reader response critics have traced how such effects might be realized through the act of reading. In its most profound form--and by that I mean a depth and intensity of reading characterized by intellectual and psychic engagement and immersion into the "destructive element" of the text--I believe the reading of fiction to be a form of putting

one's self into question with the certainty that when we retrace our identity, that self will only more or less resemble that with which we entered the work. Thus readers speak of "losing" themselves in a book. The question, then, becomes who are we when found?

When Wolfgang Iser discusses the reading process as an "active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection" in which a fiction's "dynamism" is generated by the reader's "filling in the gaps left by the text itself," he is describing a phenomenological transaction which in effect vivifies the text. Iser employs the analogy of constellations in which the linguistic signs of the text are equated with the fixed stars in a night sky. The "lines" with which the chance patterns of heavenly bodies are transformed into recognizable forms are equated with the "variable" and "inexhaustible" permutations through which readers "transform" linguistic signs into the "active and creative" experience of reading. Iser points out that this process is "closely akin to the way in which we gather experience in life<sup>5</sup>. And thus the 'reality' of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>An excellent example of this process is in the reader's experience of Jim's character in Lord Jim, which will be discussed in chapter five.

<sup>6</sup>What also bears comment here is the existential nature of this analogy. Constellations are but a form of cosmic "connect the dots" upon which humankind, faced with the impenetrable and inexhaustible darkness of the universe, seeks to impose "significant form."

The most commented upon aspect of Iser's trenchant analysis is the concept of textual "gaps," the "unwritten" parts of a work which "stimulate the reader's creative participation and set into motion the reading dynamic. Yet what remains only implicit is the "abysmal" nature of gaps. They are terra incognita, an intellectual terrain devoid of signs, the "ground" in which the existent/reader is confronted with a continuum of choices between self-invention (how to be) and extinction (whether to be); that is, between sustaining or ending the literary experience. This last option is an aspect neglected in Iser's description. While he speaks of textual gaps as a series of opportunities for the reader to "climb aboard," even, in its fullest fruition, to "formulate ourselves," each gap or "blockage" also presents the reader with the possibility of "jumping ship." Thus does the reading act--through the reader's continuous negotiation of and decision making about textual gaps--constitute in fact an existential act. The reading experience does, in this sense, powerfully mirror reality not only mimetically through the situations it creates but more significantly phenomenologically through the raw existential quality of the experience itself. Herein lies the relevance, I trust, of my Conradian allusion above to the "destructive element" of the text. The act of reading can be seen as a type of ontological training in which one either learns to swim or one sinks; one either becomes or decays; that is, the reader--in the face of

all rational and pragmatic and sophisticated evidence to the contrary--affirms his or her belief in the literary work as a thing which, through the act of committed reading, "becomes" rather than "is." One, for example, hasn't "had" Shakespeare or the Romantic poets with the connotation of something mastered or endured but rather the individual turns and returns to these texts, as did J.S. Mill, as sources of and for life. Our experience of visionary characters reflects a prime example of this phenomenon.

As I hope I have outlined historically, the existence of a correlation between the acts of reading, studying and responding to significant literary works and the ethical and quotidian content and conduct of our lives is an enduring ideal, but one, to judge from the rarified matter of much professional dialogue about literature, often forgotten, repressed, disguised, or in some cases even disdained. In his admirable The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction, Wayne Booth discerns five reasons for the decline of "ethical criticism," by which he means "any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and society..." (11): first, that a greater emphasis on the actual effects of literature would result in censorship; second, that value judgements are subjective and thus incompatible with a serious intellectual discipline, that knowledge is only

attainable from facts<sup>7</sup>; third, (an apparent corollary of two) true reason evolves only from critical doubt. From this perspective, it would be inappropriate for the reader to surrender him or herself to the "invitation" of the text<sup>8</sup>; fourth, the problem of variability in standards of taste and aesthetic value: the belief that "conflicting values cancel each other out"; fifth, the ascendancy of abstract theories of art, which, because of narrative's emphasis upon content, has proved particularly debilitating to ethical criticism of fiction (26-37).

However valid any of these reasons may be, even a cursory view of the current state of literary studies reveals that a significant number of the most technically gifted readers have apparently come to view the critical act as primarily abstract and theoretical rather than ethical. Writing about what one reads is now more often than not denied an ethical dimension; it is, it seems to me, aimed more toward the delineation and defense of professional turf than toward personal discovery and decision. The concern is with "how to be" a formalist, structuralist, or deconstructionist critic rather than with how interaction with the literary work affects one's being beyond the work if, in fact, the post-structuralist critic grants the existence of anything beyond

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. both Ambrose Ridley in The Voyage Out (chapter four) and Jim's naval tribunal in Lord Jim (chapter five).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. my remarks on Wolfgang Iser's analysis of the reading process in this chapter.

the text. The argument becomes political, not ethical with the emphasis on theory not only preceding but seemingly obviating action. We think but, neglecting Spenser's advice, we do not do.

In discussing reading as an ethical act, Gary Saul Morson expresses his discomfort at recommending Tolstoy's What Is Art? and "similar writings," recognizing that he "risk(s) seeming naive, because all that people remember about these essays is their narrow moralism--the very thing that has given moral criticism a bad name. In reacting to such narrowness, we have mistakenly banned moral criticism altogether." But Morson sees beyond what he terms "Tolstoy's objectionable moralism" to the Russian's insight that what is essential to the literary work is not whatever explicit moral one may glean from it, but instead its ability to "infect" (Tolstoy's term) us with "moral values that we as readers practice moment to moment while reading it" (527) and, I would add, inculcate into our everyday lives as well.

Near the end of his life, Hermann Hesse observed that he had a "charge, albeit small and confined: to help other seekers to understand and to cope with the world, if only by assuring them that they are not alone." Yet I suspect that many of us are uncomfortable with art and approaches to art that revolve around such bald questions as the "meaning of life." We are uncomfortable, I think, not primarily because the answers--or their absence--may prove, as with writers like

Conrad and Camus, disconcerting, but because we are embarrassed by their naivete or, to look at them from the other end, because they lack the patina of sophistication and intellectual rigor of, say, deconstruction. We are both compelled and rendered uneasy by the "accursed" question much as the inhabitants of fictional worlds will be seen to be alternately, even simultaneously, compelled and embarrassed by the visionary in their midst.

As I stated, the question of the "aesthetic" potential of literature is the complementary thesis of my study. It is a theme, however, integrally related to my stated topic of visionary literature, not only because these fictions grapple with the difficult and daunting issue of individual identity in an existential universe but also because virtually all the visionaries in this study are themselves readers and many are artists or artisans, which is to say they are by nature inclined toward reflection and creative ways of interpreting their worlds. The cogent and provocative temper of their critiques is why these texts are valuable and remarkable to me for they have the power of shocking me into awareness. Heidegger, whose life described a moral chasm between reading and living<sup>9</sup>, speaks of the world being "lit up" for us when its "instrumentality"--the tools and services and institutions that constitute the fabric of everyday life--breaks down. This

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<sup>9</sup>See especially Victor Farias's Heidegger and Naziism and Jean-Francois Lyotard's Heidegger and the "jews".

"breakdown" and subsequent illumination is what the visionary hero experiences and shares with the reader: the ability to "light up" the habitual patterns and assumptions of our everyday psychic life. The visionary offers, in John Gardner's phrase, "the flicker of lightning that shows where we are" (16) and in so doing evokes reflection and response and change in us<sup>10</sup>.

Having outlined an ethical context for my discussion, let me now turn to defining my two key terms. Since it will serve as the background for my analysis of visionary texts, I will begin with "existentialism," which is most often designated an "attitude" rather than a coherent philosophy<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, its complexity and broadly divergent manifestations have rendered it notoriously elusive as a concept<sup>12</sup>. Sartre, whose "existence precedes essence" is the closest one can come

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<sup>10</sup>By "change," I am speaking again of moral growth along the lines of my above definition of "moral." It is this type of change that is implicit in the conclusion of Forster's Aspects of the Novel when he envisions a time when "the phrase 'the development of the novel' might cease to be a pseudo-scholarly tag or a technical triviality, and become important, because it implied the development of humanity" (174).

<sup>11</sup>We expect, too, I think it is safe to say, more objectivity and detachment from our ideal of a philosopher than most existential thinkers deliver.

<sup>12</sup>As might well be expected of a world view which numbers among its elite a Protestant like Soren Kierkegaard, a Jew like Martin Bauber, a Catholic like Miguel de Unamuno, and an atheist like Jean Paul Sartre (which is not to mention those, like Albert Camus, who are wont to switch "affiliations" in search of spiritual solace.) I recognize, too, that in any event no self-respecting "existentialist" would allow her or himself to be classified as such.

to an actual definition, complained that "the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all<sup>13</sup>" (Kaufmann, 289). However, in this study the term will mean something, to wit: the universe as indifferent to human needs and enterprise; human life as essentially tragic; and the individual's role within that universe and life as defined by individual choice, social responsibility, and spiritual commitment in the pursuit of authentic selfhood.

This overview itself requires elucidation. Regarding my first two components, I would cite William Barrett's observation that "the radical feeling of human finitude<sup>14</sup>," which he sees as the defining characteristic of the modern human condition, is a result of "alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and

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<sup>13</sup>There is an interesting parallel between Sartre's observation regarding existentialism and the fortunes of deconstruction in the public linguistic domain. Although David Lehman makes a similar observation in his acerbic attack on deconstruction in Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man (see especially his first chapter), he seems to also suggest an intellectual equation between the two concepts, labeling existentialism "that mid-century salute to death-of-god theorizing in the Gallic manner" (19). While Lehman is no doubt being arch here, it is ironic to note that existentialism, which stresses individual choice, decision, and responsibility, could not be further removed from the tenets of deconstruction, which in Lehman's own words "puts into question things like cause and effect, right and wrong...(and) that individuals are agents of volition..." (41).

<sup>14</sup>Barrett defines "human finitude" as "the presence of the not in the being of man" (290).

unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat" (36). It is perhaps easy when confronted with phrases like Barrett's to understand Lehman's waggishness (cited in the footnote above) in regard to existentialism. The brooding pessimism<sup>15</sup> which is often unjustly attributed to existential thought seems to frequently provoke a (defensive?) desire to laugh and then to get on with one's life in the "real world." I am not entirely sure that this is unsound advice. But I know, too, that in its unwavering insistence on the individual's responsibility for "making" him or herself through a lifetime of choices; in its valorization of consciousness, by which I mean an accurate appraisal of the human condition<sup>16</sup>; and, most significantly, in its inextricable linking of the world of thought and the world of everyday

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<sup>15</sup>See Sartre's seminal essay "Existentialism Is a Humanism" for a spirited defense against charges of existentialism's pessimism.

<sup>16</sup>Miguel De Unamuno asks: "Which would you find most appalling--to feel such a pain as would deprive you of your senses on being pierced through with a white-hot iron, or to see yourself thus pierced through without feeling any pain? Have you never felt the horrible terror of feeling yourself incapable of suffering and tears? Suffering tells us that we exist..." (207). If doubt exists as to the "terror" of which De Unamuno speaks, consult the Autobiography of John Stuart Mill cited above. While Olsen reminds us that 'Englishman' and 'Utilitarian' are still dirty words in the existentialists' vocabulary" (15), Mill did once observe that it would be far better to be Socrates unhappy than to be a contented pig. Indeed for a temperament such as Mills' to be born the son of Jeremy Bentham's chief lieutenant seems a cruel twist of fate. As to the beneficial effects of suffering, see the comments below of Irving Howe regarding the value of questions.

life<sup>17</sup>, existentialism as a world view dwells more affectively and more concretely in that "real world" than any other perspective--however loosely defined--I have encountered.

But what are the "realities" of our world, why are they "tragic," and why is existentialism a cogent way of confronting them? I suggested as part of my existential criteria a universe whose nature is "indifferent to human needs." In Woody Allen's<sup>18</sup> Hannah and Her Sisters Allen's character is desperate for a source of spiritual direction in his life; consequently, he investigates a series of faiths, momentarily seizing upon Catholicism, a choice which, to understate the situation, nonpluses his Jewish parents. While his mother wails in another room, Allen confronts his father with Allen's need for spiritual certainty in a morally ambiguous world, finally blurting out, "How do you explain evil? How do you explain Nazis?" "Nazis?" the father responds. "How do you expect me to explain Nazis? I can't even figure out how the can opener works." Herein lies our burden--the need to discover a moral fulcrum upon which to balance our existence--enveloped within a dilemma: the desire and need to

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<sup>17</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, the so-called "father" of modern existentialism, is in my view a modern archetype of this type of integrated, holistic life: a man who "drank from his own well."

<sup>18</sup>Since I originally wrote this chapter, Allen's fortunes have undergone a precipitous fall, which again serves to delineate the distinctions between theory and practice as well as the advisability of completing one's dissertation in a timely manner.

live our lives in the quotidian/material world--to both negotiate its myriad obstacles and, we hope, reap the benefits of our diligence and skill in doing so--while somehow also satisfying the moral imperative of confronting humankind's undiminished capacity for evil. This tension and clash--indeed, this incompatibility--between the desire for comfort and joy on the one hand and for psychic wholeness and moral rectitude on the other will be played out repeatedly in the visionary texts I will examine<sup>19</sup>.

Allen's character's desire to find an articulated faith which will offer him moral direction likely touches a

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<sup>19</sup>Hannah and Her Sisters is a romance in which the myriad ills that gnaw at human happiness and harmony (disease, infidelity, jealousy, despair, and lust--to name but a few that appear in this film) are happily resolved as the various permutations of couples and relationships align or realign themselves. Allen's character comes to realize that being "part of (a life)" that includes the Marx brothers and the possibility of joy is "worth it." All ends harmoniously in and at Thanksgiving. Never resolved, however, is Allen's awkward question to his father about the prevalence and magnitude of human evil. Indeed, the film is peppered with references to Nazis almost as if Allen sought to inject his romance with the germ of darkness, which, his character realizes, like the cancer he feared had infected his brain, waits symbolically, ineluctably for and in us all. A more cynical and realistic vision of human endeavor is offered in Allen's later Crimes and Misdemeanors, in which the protagonist, mired in an extramarital affair gone dangerously sour, solves his "problem" through murder, a deed which propels him into an abyss of depression, which in turn (and herein lies true realism) he not only survives but transcends. By film's end, he has apparently resolved, psychically and spiritually, the despair that had threatened to engulf him. In the film's concluding scene, he cathartically retells his experience to the Allen character, who produces socially relevant (and thus) unsuccessful documentaries, in the form of a potential film script. Interestingly, the dominant image motif in Crimes and Misdemeanors is that of vision.

responsive chord in us all. It is, nonetheless, a futile desire. Sartre defines the human condition as "one of free choice (but) without excuse and without help" (307). Without excuse because we are the sum of our free choices; there exists neither a human essence/nature to explain or excuse those choices; nor a supernatural power to help us make them:

The existentialist...finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven....Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. (294-95, Kaufmann)

With this in mind, the implications of Sartre's phrase "condemned to freedom" begins to crystalize as does also, perhaps, what is meant by the "tragic condition of humankind." We will see characters confront such condemnation in, for example, Bartleby's brick wall reveries; in Terence Hewet's realization of Rachel's Vinrace's death; and in Jim's loss of his code of conduct.

In the film, Allen's character, fearing an apparently imminent death, confronts and answers Camus's question, escaping death only because he is sweating so profusely that the rifle barrel slips as he pulls its trigger. His reclamation of life occurs, significantly, alone in a moviehouse watching the Marx Brothers. There, like Plato's prisoners in the cave<sup>20</sup>, he is literally and symbolically in

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<sup>20</sup>Plato's allegory will emerge as a prominent visionary motif in my discussion of "Act of Faith" and The Voyage Out.

the dark watching images flicker on a screen while surrounded by others in the same condition. It is in those circumstances that he must make his choice. His desire for an explanation of nazism is, of course, never granted. I think existentialism may provide one.

Surely one must ask whether it is necessary to conjure the grim implications of Auschwitz, possibly the nadir of human experience, as representative of the "real world"<sup>21</sup>. Unquestionably the rhythms of the daily lives of most women and men are characterized by decency and decorum; without that, anarchy would be at every door. But is this perhaps too facile of an assumption in that it implies the Holocaust as aberration, as "an interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity" to be commemorated by annual Holocaust observances and the like (Bauman, viii)? The suggestion is that while the Holocaust should be remembered, that that memory be sufficiently circumscribed so that it not encumber the solid and comfortable furniture of our everyday psychic life. Robert Nozick places the wages of confronting the truths of the Holocaust into stark perspective. Given the reality of the Holocaust, he writes, the termination of the human race is not unthinkable. Not desirable perhaps, but it "would now be no special loss above and beyond the losses to

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<sup>21</sup>Auschwitz was referred to as "the asshole of the world" by condemned and executioners alike. For a graphic depiction of the phrase, see Lina Wertmuller's film Seven Beauties.

the individuals involved. Humanity has lost its claim to continue" (238). Nozick images the Holocaust as "a massive cataclysm that distorts everything around it" (242). I would suggest that it is this distortion--the abyss of human perfidy underlying the structures of everyday life--that the visionary ahistorically perceives.

But such reasons for emphasizing the centrality of the Holocaust are perhaps insufficient. Let me cite others: first, as I hope my discussion below of Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland will demonstrate, the gap between quotidian and visionary experience is no gap at all but rather a distinction in moral acuity and, consequently, of how to be; second, the Holocaust was perhaps the ultimate "limit situation," which is a key to visionary experience<sup>22</sup>; third, the Holocaust was fueled by and the culmination of the triumph of the literature of anti-Semitic myth; fourth, many of the most influential thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition fed into and off those myths<sup>23</sup>; fifth, the Holocaust may be seen as the inevitable outgrowth of modernity itself<sup>24</sup>; sixth, and most importantly, the career of anti-Semitism is integrally bound to the concept

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<sup>22</sup>This idea from Karl Jaspers will be discussed in chapter two.

<sup>23</sup>And in this context it should be noted again that the Holocaust was perpetrated by perhaps "the most civilized nation on the face of the earth."

<sup>24</sup>Bauman's Modernity and the Holocaust offers a cogent defense of this thesis and is indeed the source of this idea.

of identity. From the time of the Babylonian Captivity when Jews evolved many of their religious rituals as a defense against cultural assimilation, through the various attempts by European "liberals" to reform the "depraved Jewish character"<sup>25</sup> by ostensibly incorporating them into the body politic, and culminating with the Holocaust as the Final Solution to this age old "problem," the persecution of the Jews has always been to a significant degree the product of Jews' very authenticity--their refusal to relinquish their identity as Jews. The significance of this for each of us as we seek our own authenticity, sometimes utilizing visionary texts as possible models, would seem clear.

It is interesting within this context, then, to note David Hirsch's observation that "the quintessence of Nazism was precisely an assault on the concept of the existence of the self carried to its logical extreme" (95). The Jews, historically the archetypal Other<sup>26</sup>, were exterminated by the Nazis because they were perceived by their persecutors as subhuman, a process which was but the culmination of a mythic apparatus centuries in the making: the Jew as killer of

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<sup>25</sup>See Rose, especially chapter 6.

<sup>26</sup>I have been asked why women wouldn't be a more logical historical choice for this dubious distinction. Two reasons: first, a grouping by race rather than gender offers a better microcosm of humanity; second, as mentioned above, the idea of Jewishness seems inextricably bound to the idea of identity. The larger point, however, is not which group has been more oppressed but rather humanity's indefatigable appetite for oppression.

Christ; as killer of Christian children; as drinker of their shed blood and slaughtered flesh (or, in a variant, as desecrater of the sacramental host); as poisoner of Christian wells; as usurer. These myths are the lifeblood of anti-Semitism, and they have been perpetrated by some of the most influential thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition--Christian, Jew and atheist alike. In a pamphlet entitled "The Jews and Their Lies," Martin Luther condemned the Jews for all the above "crimes":

So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which (the Jews) shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since then (which still shines forth from their eyes and their skin). We are at fault in not slaying them.

Paul Rose observes, "Through the influence of Luther's language and tracts, a hysterical and demonizing mentality entered the mainstream of German thought and discourse; Luther in fact legitimated hysteria and paranoia in a major European culture" (163). In 1935 the Nazis reissued Luther's pamphlet in a popular edition.

What evolves most tellingly and most frighteningly from the analysis by historians like Rose and Gavin Langmuir<sup>27</sup> of the enduring career of anti-Semitism is, in the words of Robert Alter, "the awesome power over human events of word, image, and narrative." Alter argues that without the invention

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<sup>27</sup>See Langmuir's History, Religion, and Antisemitism and Toward a Definition of Antisemitism.

and propagation of anti-Semitic myths, the Nazi's holocaust would never have occurred: "Words are the first weapons of mass destruction."

Words, however, are coined and manipulated by men and women. Alter notes the German language's wealth of "verbal and substantive terms for extirpation," and suggests that the "lethal ambiguity" of these terms as they were used in relation to the "Jewish Problem" afforded a "cover that made it possible for men of good conscience to speak about the unspeakable." These thinkers, among whom are listed Kant, Marx, and Voltaire "would have considered themselves men of humane values, certainly idealists..." (40). That is, they were men who would have conducted themselves with decency and decorum.

In "Portrait of the Antisemite" Sartre seizes upon this discrepancy between appearance and reality in relating the story of a fishmonger in 1942 who, angered at competition of two Jewish competitors who had disguised their race, denounced them to the authorities. "I was assured," says Sartre, "that in other respects (the Christian fishmonger) was kind and jovial, the best son in the world. But," concludes Sartre, "I don't believe it:

A man who finds it natural to denounce men cannot have our concept of the humane; he does not even see those whom he aids in the same light as we do; his generosity, his kindness are not like our kindness, our generosity; one cannot localize passion (276).

So we are reminded again of the difficulty of apprehending the real, of acknowledging the implications of truth, of attaining disillusionment.

My concern, however, is not with "great thinkers," but as I stated, with myself and the connection between my life in literature and my life in the world. In this respect another recent study on a small corner of the Holocaust (which Rose calls "...the ultimate practical achievement of a century and a half of the mythogenic development of German revolutionary antisemitism," (58) may be more revealing. In Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland Christopher Browning examines the sixteen month career of an approximately 500 man German unit of what were euphemistically and paradoxically termed "order police"<sup>28</sup> composed of ordinary Germans, men in their 30's and 40's, who, because of their age

...went through their formative periods in the pre-Nazi era. These were men who had known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis. Most came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least nazified cities in Germany, and the majority came from a social class that had been anti-Nazi in its political culture. These men would not seem to have been a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers on behalf of the Nazi vision of a racial utopia free of Jews. (48)

Their job, which fell to them because of personnel shortages in other units, was nonetheless "executed" with skill and even zeal: they participated--through direct shootings and

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<sup>28</sup>These units were essentially occupying forces in areas conquered by the German army.

transportation to Nazi death camps--in the slaughter of 80,000 Polish Jews. Browning's thesis, of course, is an investigation of the motivations of these "ordinary men": what induced them to become mass murderers of, mostly, women, children and elderly men?

Not surprisingly, Browning's conclusions cite the influence of a virulent anti-Semitism and, more shockingly, the post-war ambitions of the killers. But he places most of the weight of his analysis upon simple peer pressure: "the social psychological conditions, the objective and keenly felt pressures of the group, the fear of being held in contempt by one's comrades: these were what turned these men into killers...and kept them at it" (Goldhagen, 50). The existentialists would label such a condition a "flight from freedom" or "bad faith" or simply inauthenticity. Moreover, Browning concludes his study with another example of Dostoyevsky's "accursed questions": "If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?"

It is important to remember that this unit did not experience the "crucible of combat." A Nazi commander observed that "the shooting of the Jews was not a matter of destroying elements that represented a threat either to the fighting troops or to the pacification of the field of operations behind the lines; it was simply a matter of destroying Jews for the sake of destroying Jews" (52). Virtually none of the

men of this unit were fired upon by or fired at a traditional enemy during the duration of the war. But what is truly revelatory in this book is that the participation in genocide by these ordinary men was voluntary; they were mass murderers by choice. As Daniel Goldhagen points out, previous Holocaust scholarship has assumed that German troops who participated in the actual killing of Jews fell into two groups: the Waffen SS, the "true" (authentic?) and rabid Nazis who manifested the "culture of death," and rank and file German troops who acted under coercion.

What Browning shows, however, is far more chilling. On July 11, 1941, Reserve Police Battalion 101 had the task of rounding up the 1800 Jews of the Polish village of Jozefow. Unlike their previous actions which had involved relocating the Jewish population, the Germans were to summarily execute all women, children and elderly, with working age males being sent to work camps. The battalion commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, with tears streaming down his face, gathered his men together, and, "after explaining the battalion's murderous assignment, made an extraordinary offer: any of the older men who did not feel up to the task that lay before them could step out" (57). Previously, if the all too familiar cry of having "only followed orders" raised nothing other than revulsion when cited by death camp commandants and members of the Nazi hierarchy, there existed a tacit assumption that the common German soldier acted under some degree of compulsion:

The authoritarian political culture of the Nazi dictatorship, savagely intolerant of overt dissent, along with the standard military necessity of obedience to orders and ruthless enforcement of discipline, created a situation in which individuals had no choice...Disobedience surely meant the concentration camp if not immediate execution, possibly for their families as well.

There is a problem with this explanation, however. Quite simply, in the past forty-five years no defense attorney or defendant in any of the hundreds of postwar trials has been able to document a single case in which refusal to obey an order to kill unarmed civilians resulted in the allegedly inevitable dire punishment. The punishment or censure that occasionally did result from such disobedience was never commensurate with the gravity of the crimes the men had been asked to commit. (170)<sup>29</sup>

The participation in the slaughter by the "ordinary men" of Police Battalion 101 was a matter of personal choice and commitment to ideas that had been inculcated in them through oral and written literature, specifically through the mythology of anti-Semitism that in fact fueled the Holocaust. Each of these men made an autonomous, cognitive, existential choice to become a killer of Jews--what Goldhagen calls "voluntary barbarism"--based upon "a profoundly anti-Semitic, hallucinatory image of them" (52)<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup>Browning also addresses the reasonable argument of "putative duress," that these men had no way of knowing that they, in fact, would not face dire consequences for not participating in the slaughter. While some of the unit's officers and non-commissioned officers did pressure recalcitrant soldiers, there existed, because of the unambiguous sympathy and indeed protection extended by Major Trapp, a set of unwritten assumptions that any man could refuse participation with virtual impunity.

<sup>30</sup>It is important here, I think, to understand that the choice these men made was existential. Of the approximately

The brute fact of the reality of the Holocaust stands as

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five hundred men in the battalion, about twelve took up Trapp's offer. Others, once the shooting had begun, found means of avoiding participation. Nonetheless, it is clear that between 80 and 90 percent of the battalion took part in the extermination, which lasted for seventeen hours. The manner of execution is revealing. The condemned Jews were trucked from a reception center to the edge of a nearby woods where they were met by squads of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Each squad member would, face to face, take charge of a prisoner, and the condemned were escorted to various clearings where they were ordered to lay face down. The executioners would then place their rifles at the base of the victim's skull and fire. Again, the massacre at Jozefow lasted for seventeen hours with the execution squads working in relays. There were regular "breaks" for food and even alcohol. Furthermore, the men who requested and received release from participation in the slaughter did so not from moral compunction but rather from physical revulsion at the visceral nature of the killings. One of the killers recalled:

I especially asked to be relieved because the man next to me shot so impossibly. Apparently he always aimed his gun too high, producing terrible wounds in his victims. In many cases the entire backs of victims' heads were torn off, so that the brains sprayed all over. I simply couldn't watch it any longer (68).

It seems to stretch credulity that the aesthetic sensibilities of these men could be acute while their moral sense remained dormant. Yet the numbing shock this unit felt almost to a man over their experience at Jozefow was soon replaced by workmanlike competence and even zeal (recall the experience of J.S. Mill). As the mass executions and transportations progressed, these "ordinary" men participated in what they called "Jew hunts," patrols whose goal was to search out and destroy any Jews who had eluded the general slaughter. Browning points out that this phase of the Holocaust was not incidental but rather "a tenacious, remorseless, ongoing campaign in which the 'hunters' tracked down and killed their 'prey' in direct and personal confrontation. It was not a passing phase but an existential condition of constant readiness and intention to kill every last Jew who could be found" (132). Indeed, this activity, which again brought the Germans face to face with their victims and where again they could exercise a considerable amount of choice, became so prominent an aspect of these men's identities and duties that they began to refer to it as their "daily bread."

an objective correlative of the psychic implications of an existential universe: a world with a capacity for a voracious, irrational and, subsequent events would suggest, undiminished predatoriness framed by an indifferent and silent cosmos. Faced with the Holocaust's historicity, we are faced, too, with Browning's "accursed" question of our own innate capacity for complicity as ordinary men and women with the killers of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Existentialism, of course, would deny that connection for there exists no human essence that would dictate for any of us the choices made by those men. But the conditions within which those choices were made--racial myth, authoritarian rule, alienation, personal greed, the loss of empathy and the failure of responsibility--remain undiminished. In our own country one need only tap into the zeitgeist concerning, say, AIDS or military escapades against the Other of the moment to be reminded of the alienating and isolating choices of ways to be that are made daily<sup>31</sup>.

I suggested earlier that existentialist thought offers a reply to our puzzlement over the existence of nazism/evil. It is provided by Sartre in "Portrait of an Antisemite." I will quote his conclusion:

We can now understand him. He is a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews of course, but of himself, of his conscience, his freedom, of his instincts, of his responsibilities, of solitude, of change, of

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<sup>31</sup>And consequently, of course, a de facto decision of the Other's right to be.

society and the world; of everything except the Jews. He is a coward who does not want to admit his cowardice to himself; a murderer who represses and censures his penchant for murder without being able to restrain it and who nevertheless does not dare to kill except in effigy or in the anonymity of the mob; a malcontent who dares not revolt for fear of the consequences of his rebellion. By adhering to antisemitism, he is not only adopting an opinion, he is choosing himself as a person. He is choosing the permanence and the impenetrability of rock, the total irresponsibility of the warrior who obeys his leaders--and he has no leader. He chooses to acquire nothing, to deserve nothing but that everything be given him as his birthright--and he is not noble. He chooses finally, that good be readymade, not in question, out of reach; he dare not look at it for fear of being forced to contest it and seek another form of it. The Jew is only a pretext; elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew's existence merely allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate. The antisemite is a man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man (286-87).

In touching upon the themes of the anti-Semite's fear before that which is in question or doubt; of his desire for a place in the world that is ready-made, not earned; of, in sum, his terror before his human condition, Sartre names some of the core issues of visionary fiction. In this vein, I wish to suggest that the fulcrum of this study, the visionary character, through his or her status as outsider, as alien to the quotidian world, as authentic individual, and ultimately

as reflector of that which is best or worst in all of us, to be a form of Jew.<sup>32</sup>

Admittedly, "visionary," my second key term, is an exceptionally elusive, even vague, designation. It has been applied to historical and public figures from Attila to Saint Joan; from Martin Luther King to Leona Helmsley. In spite of the term's ubiquity, definitions within literary studies are few, and those that exist accent the term's connections with the unreal, imaginary, and speculative. Northrop Frye, in his seminal study of Blake, defines the visionary as one who "creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism" (8). That is, the visionary is able to see deeper and further into the stuff of the physical realm, into its true nature/identity, in a manner that would suggest Hopkins' conception of inscape. While my sense of the visionary is integrally tied to the idea of insight, Frye's use of the phrase "higher spiritual world," both in its implication of a realm removed from the physical plane in which men and women exist and in its emphasis upon

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<sup>32</sup>I suggest this idea within the (continuing) historical framework of the wholeness of Jewish life--the interconnectedness of religion, state, and family--rather than in positing Jews as potentially or inherently any more authentic than members of any other ethnic or religious group. Nonetheless, as one recent commentator remarked, "Jews are now liable to be envied for their persistent sense of identity. They seem to be exempt from the blurred individualism of the lonely crowd of a society increasingly denied cohesion" (Raphael).

spiritual rather than existential values, treats the "visionary" antithetically to my sense of the term.

However, Colin Wilson's conception of the "Outsider" shares important attributes with mine of the visionary. He emphasizes, most significantly, the idea of the Outsider as Truth-teller, one who sees "Too deep and too much" into the human condition and is compelled to act upon that vision:

For the bourgeois, the world is fundamentally an orderly place, with a disturbing element of the irrational, the terrifying, which his preoccupation with the present usually permits him to ignore. For the Outsider, the world is not rational, not orderly. When he asserts his sense of anarchy in the face of the bourgeois' complacent acceptance, it is not simply the need to cock a snook at respectability that provokes him; it is a distressing sense that truth must be told at all costs, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order....The Outsider is a man who has awakened to chaos." (15)

In a chapter entitled "The Outsider as Visionary," Wilson deals with George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, and, almost de rigeur, William Blake, emphasizing the visionary as one who "starts from a point that everybody can understand, and very soon soars beyond the general understanding" (203). While Wilson speaks of the "actual" visions experienced by Fox and Blake, he argues, correctly (although perhaps in contradiction to his image of a recondite visionary knowledge in full flight) that the value of their writing "does not lie in the 'visions' their words can conjure up for us, but in the instructions they left for anyone who should want to see the same things that they saw" (204). That

is, Wilson places the ultimate value of visionary experience in its ability to guide our being in this world.

Wilson's argument is compelling, in part admittedly because it is the only study I have encountered which strikes substantial harmony with my own ideas. However, besides distinctions in terminology and texts, there are important differences that should be noted. First, Wilson's Outsiders experience their otherness in medias res; the key element in my treatment of visionary experience is the existential moment, the evolution from blindness to insight, from being in the quotidian/bourgeois to being in the visionary realms. Second, Wilson speaks of "rid(ding) ourselves of the temptation to identify the Outsider with the artist" (14). However, this identification is central to my argument, which extends and focuses this connection to the act of engaged reading by which I mean the reader's ability to see and perhaps enact the paradigmatic possibilities for living presented by the visionary text. Third, Wilson ignores female visionary experience when, given the lack of choices historically imposed upon women by a patriarchal culture, they are much better candidates for revolt than most men.

Specifically, I will utilize "visionary" in the sense of the ancient Greek word for "truth," which meant "unhiddenness." That is, the visionary will be primarily defined by his or her ability to see what is in this world but hidden rather than the quality of being able to envision what

will be in this or another world but does not yet exist. The visionary's "sight" is an acting out of the biblical phrase "the evidence of things unseen." In this sense, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" will serve throughout this study as a classical paradigm for modern visionary experience<sup>33</sup>. The visionary is the individual who, in William Barrett's phrase, "can no longer hide his nakedness by the old disguises." He or she has lost the ability to be pragmatic in responding to the world, rejected conventional morality, and embraced instead a personal ethic based upon his or her most profound self-consciousness. In an existential sense, visionaries' actions in response to what they see might be labeled an "act of conscience"; always, having achieved vision, they are motivated by a quest for authenticity and thus an ability to not only see acutely and profoundly into the human condition but also to act upon that vision. That is, as in Shaw's conception of the genius/saint<sup>34</sup>, the visionary hero must

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<sup>33</sup>In its emphasis upon essences, Plato's thought is, of course, antithetical to existentialism. His allegory, however, loses none of its power even if one were to redefine the nature of the truth the freed prisoner discovers. It is also worth noting that Plato and existentialist thinkers from Kierkegaard onward all pursued essentially the same goal: human salvation. Plato sought his in the ideal forms that would transcend the mortal realm; the existentialist seeks only within that realm.

<sup>34</sup>In Saint Joan, Shaw defines a genius as "a person who, seeing farther and probing deeper than other people, has a different set of ethical values from theirs, and has energy enough to give effect to this extra vision and its valuations in whatever manner best suits his or her specific talents" (10). While I certainly do not wish to embroil my discussion of visionary experience with the term "genius," Shaw's

reconcile and give effect to what he or she "sees" on a psychic plane within the everyday world of getting and spending, living and dying. Visionary heroes cogently illustrate art's ability to "rouse the faculties to act."

In light of these criteria, I have chosen to work with, in order, "The Brink of Darkness," Miss Lonelyhearts, "Act of Faith," The Voyage Out and Lord Jim. I hope these selections will accomplish several ends: first, the study's frame of "Brink" and Lord Jim provides a contrast between a character who recoils from the implications of vision and one who doggedly pursues them; second, ML and "Act" demonstrate the coherence of visionary fictions through the juxtaposition of a modern classic and a relatively obscure short story; third, Voyage, in addition to being the prototype for my conception of visionary fictions, simply offers one of the most powerful evocations of their function. Most significantly, of course, I hope to offer original insights for each of these works.

Undoubtedly, the visionary fictions listed above are far from comprehensive nor are such effects limited to fiction. I have focused on narrative not only for the pragmatic reason of limiting a potentially amorphous topic but more significantly

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definition is nonetheless helpful. The distinction he makes between "seeing" and "probing" also foreshadows, respectively, what I will define below as the visionary's initial "existential moment" and his or her subsequent and persistent questioning of the accepted norms of a given milieu. The reference to differing "ethical values" succinctly captures the inherent tension between the visionary and the quotidian world.

because of fiction's mimetic properties. "Fiction," John Gardner has written, "goes after understanding by capturing, through imitation, 'the ineluctable modality of the world'-- that is, characters who subtly embody values and who test them, with clear but inexpressible results, in action" (92). Moreover, the preponderance of "visionary" short stories and novellas reflects Langbaum's observation of the profound influence the related concept of "epiphany" has exerted on modern fiction and the short story in particular (336). But while the list in its present form is based upon the peculiarities and exigencies of my own reading, it more rigorously reflects my observation of a complex of traits I noticed repeated throughout these works, and although I again make no claim that each of the following characteristics appears in each of the listed works, enough do appear in each work to signal us of their probable significance:

1. the existential moment (a special form of epiphany)
2. absence or loss of visionary's correct name or any name at all
3. encounters with primal settings
4. "truth-telling" (and frequently subsequent obnoxiousness)
5. the visionary's isolation/outsider status
6. collapsing of topographical and psychic margins
7. the visionary as reader and/or artist
8. primacy of the interrogative mode
9. existential motifs, themes, and imagery
10. the strategic inclusion of reader in choice-making: the "one of us," "shock of recognition," "you, hypocrite lecteur" motif
11. conflict between visionary and quotidian worlds
12. the visionary's immersion in the "destructive element"
13. the visionary's distrust of language

While these characteristics will be elucidated in my analysis of the individual texts, I would like to outline some here to demonstrate the coherence of the characters I have designated. Each visionary has, at some point, experienced a profound and irrevocable psychic shock--what I term an "existential moment"--that denies the sanctuary of blindness and places him or her in direct and often tragic opposition to the everyday world. By the "everyday world" I mean the mode of being in which most of us spend most of our lives: the cyclical core of actions and tasks which are largely performed without reflection. To be sure, this is not a value judgement, for, as Macquarrie points out, this mode of being is "concerned with the satisfaction of ordinary human needs (and is therefore) the most fundamental mode of existence..." (83). This is the realm in which we certainly do not always find, but in which we seek, comfort and joy. Yet existential thinkers point to a real danger of individual identity being lost to the everyday world (Kierkegaard denigrates the "crowd" and Nietzsche the "herd"); of the self's being controlled by the very instruments through which comfort and joy were sought:

Normally man's mind is composed only of a consciousness of his immediate needs, which is to say that his consciousness at any moment can be defined as his awareness of his own power to satisfy his needs. He thinks in terms of what he intends to do in half an hour's time, a day's time, a month's time, and no more. He never asks himself: What are the limits of my powers? (Wilson, 188)

The existence of the visionary's critique threatens the illusory structures and systems of order which constitute this everyday world and, in so doing, the very identity of those who inhabit it. The stakes of this confrontation are evident when we parallel it with the situation of the Jew in eighteenth century Germany:

The urgent search for German authenticity...helps to explain the strange intensity of the debate on the Jewish Question....The Jews were a living reproach to them, a reminder of German weakness and sinfulness, a challenge to German self-esteem. Above all, the Jews seemed to possess an almost natural ability to remain a "people" endowed with its own natural culture and consciousness, an ability envied as well as hated by the less-than-secure Germans....Perhaps what more than anything was bound to rack up German insecurity and resentment to fever pitch was the outrageous fact that Jews had escaped from the ghetto, becoming "German" in appearance but still remaining Jews either in religious, or, more insidiously, in a social or psychological sense....When primal existential categories become blurred like this, the whole order of the world is thrown into doubt, assurance fails, and the hysterical temperament runs free (Rose, 41-2).

Because the everyday world is empowered through sheer weight of numbers to name and define right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil, it possesses the power and will to ostracize vision. One of its most potent weapons is the power of naming. (One might consider, for example, the cogent reinterpretation of the Cain story offered by the visionary Demian in Hesse's novel). This power of naming is evident, too, in Charles Marlow's recognition of the ability of language to eviscerate what vision reveals:

For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder....But still--it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must--don't you know?--though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge.

The truth of Marlow's observations is borne out by the awareness of other visionary characters of both the impotence and insidiousness of language. It is evident in Bartleby's laconic disavowal of his Sisyphean copying of words to perpetuate a sterile social order; it is present, too, in Frederick Henry's recognition of the hollowness inherent in terms of honor and glory; in the realization of the writer, Miss Lonelyhearts, of the emptiness and ineffectuality of his words; in the futility of Krebs' attempts in "Soldier's Home" to communicate his enveloping alienation to his parents; in the reversion to a prelinguistic state by the narrator of Surfacing; in the cloaking invisibility of Ellison's antihero who, in his quotidian incarnation, had been "honored" for his verbal powers; in the ultimate impotence of Kurtz's magnificent voice against the primal darkness; in the mute endurance of Kafka's Hunger Artist, who is devoid of "normal" appetites. And this disaffection for language is emblemized most cogently, perhaps, in the fact that so few of these figures bear full names, or their own names, or any name at all. It will be the task of the remainder of this study to

name these characters and to understand the ways in which they  
name and enlighten our own condition.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BRINK OF VISION: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROBLEM OF BECOMING OURSELVES

"I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?"  
(Demian)

"How many live in such a way as to have renounced or gained everything, how many are simply honest enough to know what they are and what they can and cannot be?" (Kierkegaard)

"Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (King Lear)

Ivor Winter's short story "The Brink of Darkness" (1932) is unusual in at least three important ways: first, it is the only work of fiction the eminent critic and poet produced, thereby imbuing it with a special curiosity, perhaps even with a human immediacy as if it were written from need or compulsion; second, primarily because it pretty much disdains exposition, the story is especially opaque, engulfing its reader in a universe that is simultaneously alienating, disorienting, and compelling. Such opacity is not in itself unusual in the modern short story, which Robert Langbaum has cited as being "plotless and apparently pointless in order that it may be epiphanic" (345, emphases mine), and Allan Swallow cites the "psychological story" as being "frequently experimental." To be sure, a precis of the story's plot is difficult. As Terry Comito points out, its incidents do not present a "cumulative weaving of a causal chain, but rather "isolated moments of perception" which are indicative of what Winters termed his "scattered method" (13)<sup>1</sup>. Those moments of

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<sup>1</sup>Winters' conception of the four different ways of structuring a poem was expressed in "The Mechanics of the Mood" section of his essay "The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit" (1929). As outlined by Davis they are the scattered method, the logical method, the narrative method, and the psychological method. Davis glosses the scattered method as a "list of details--images or statements--that 'converge upon a common center' or serve as illustrations of the poem's theme." His claim that "from the amount of space allotted and from the tone of the discussion (in the above essay) that Winters was mainly interested...in the logical and psychological" (62), while a logical deduction, doesn't address two salient facts: first, the lone facticity of "The Brink of Darkness": why it had to be written and written, clearly, in the "scattered method; second, Winters' lifelong

perception, however, are of a cogency and nature which, along with the interrelated existential themes of the struggle for identity, the facticity of death<sup>2</sup>, and the omnipresence of chaos mark "The Brink of Darkness" as an example of visionary literature. As such, its third unusual characteristic is its visionary narrator's disavowal of his existential insight and subsequent withdrawal into the quotidian "limits of (his) old identity." This chapter will address the implications of that renunciation and conclude with a consideration of the pedagogical functions of visionary fictions.

At the outset of the story, the nameless narrator describes and traverses an elemental landscape--bitterly cold in the winter months; in the summer, an "unbearable blaze of

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fascination with and dread of the demonic element in human existence.

<sup>2</sup>Death is an especially powerful presence in Winters' story. The gruesome death of one of the narrator's students mirrors the passing of Mrs. Stone and in so doing performs the same function as the Gloucester subplot of Lear: it reminds us of the unexceptional nature of the dark events we are witnessing. These deaths are in turn reflected in the animal kingdom by the death of a mouse at the opening of the story and the pen of soon to be slaughtered coyotes encountered by the narrator. Finally death is present, too, in the plant kingdom; the flowers decorating the church at the student's funeral are described as "innocent and pathetic...curling imperceptibly inward, as if they were the sluggish dead incarnate, dying slowly again in pity..." 239). Death in visionary literature is not, it is important to note, a convention in the manner cited by Richards, that is, a strategy for completing a fiction; rather it is a palpable entity whose omnipresence and facticity renders the primary existential truth of death's ineluctability. We must remember, too, that on both a literal and symbolic level death remains a choice, e.g. Edna Pontellier, Mrs. Moore, Jim, and the narrators of Invisible Man and Surfacing to name but a few.

heat"--that in its extremity foreshadows the ontological crucible he is about to experience. He refers to his being a teacher although we do not see him in the classroom. His living arrangements--the setting of his daily life--are barely sketched. He rents (apparently) an apartment--perhaps no more than a room--from the Stones, an elderly couple (we infer). Throughout the story human presence is minimal; people are disconnected shadows isolated both from others and seemingly from any integral connection to the story itself, and, when encountered, are disquieting, even grotesque: A woman engaged to do housework is "almost featureless," sweaty, panting and covered with dust; her brother Eli is "a man of great power and agility, but without forearms....His abnormality had made an exile from human society"; the features of the grandchildren of the narrator's now deceased landlady are "obscured with sorrow"; her son is "a man who...seemed to know little of peace, whether of body or of spirit"; and the landlady herself, Mrs. Stone, who succumbs to a "frailness" she had concealed until "concealment was impossible," is perhaps the story's most profound presence as she lies in state beneath the narrator's austere room: "Upstairs were the dogs and the stove; below was the echoing desolation" (235).

Augmenting the sparseness of exposition and the isolation and angst of the story's characters is a motif of spatial disorientation which is also emblematic of visionary literature: An enveloping snowstorm causes "confusion." The

winter months are characterized by "a sky (that) had no identity--there was merely the soft air. The snow merged into the air from below with no visible dividing line. Often I should not have known whether I was going uphill or down..." (228)<sup>3</sup>. This loss of elemental and spatial distinctions, what MacQuarrie calls the perception of "things in the depth of their interrelatedness," (244) signals the narrator's growing awareness of and potential immersion into the existential "ground"--the Nothingness--which, omnipresent yet heretofore repressed, has surrounded and given definition to the "figures" of everyday life--institutions, rituals, and assumptions--which, I would suggest, have until now been the focus of his life<sup>4</sup>.

Winters' narrator is experiencing, I feel, what Karl Jaspers calls a "limit or boundary situation" (Grenzsituationen) wherein the individual/visionary confronts the impenetrable boundaries or limits of existence. As such, no "traditional" plot of cause and effect actions will

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Lord Jim, for example: "You couldn't distinguish the sea from the sky; there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Not a glimmer, not a shape, not a sound" (114).

<sup>4</sup>This is admittedly making a bit of a leap. We, of course, are not privy to what constituted the center of the narrator's life prior to the experiences related in the story. It is nonetheless reasonable to extrapolate from his profession as teacher, his excursions (and consequent interaction) with the Stones, and his keeping of pet dogs that both his everyday and psychic life were of a more mundane nature than that recounted in the narrative; that is, his experience of an existential moment is a profound departure for the narrator. Always the crux of visionary fictions is this ontological evolution.

suffice. Rather the story is composed of an unrelenting and disorienting (to both reader and character) interiority, a chaotic psychic landscape that functions as both theme and setting. The catalyst for these experiences will differ for each visionary. It may be death as in "The Brink of Darkness"; guilt as in Miss Lonelyhearts and "Act of Faith"; a sense of the precariousness of identity as in Surfacing and A Passage to India; or alienation as in Invisible Man, "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "A Hunger Artist"; often it is a combination of these realities. But what is clear in all visionary narratives is that the visionary is in a situation of extremity, which is the occasion for the beginning of his project toward authentic being--the choosing/creating of a self unimpeded by considerations of personal circumstances or the strictures and norms of state, church, or society<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, this condition of authenticity, once attained, is capable of confronting and psychically surmounting these barriers; the

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<sup>5</sup>This is not meant to suggest an "all is permitted" nihilism. Authentic being also includes "conscience"--in the sense of a moral commitment that compels the individual to act against the normative standards and assumptions of quotidian society--as a prime component. American anti-war protesters during the Vietnam War (that is those who protested before protesting attained fashionability) would be an example. A much better one, though, is offered by Vietnamese Buddhist monks who publicly immolated themselves during the war years in protest against the killing. They, in effect, answered both of this study's frame questions simultaneously. The type of choice involved in these situations is integral to what is meant by "the anguish of freedom." The imperative to choose, as Camus pointed out, is fraught with fear. Thus those Americans or Vietnamese who declined military service as an act of conscience were decidedly more courageous than those who served because their respective governments demanded it.

acknowledgement of death (Jim at the conclusion of Lord Jim would be perhaps the best example), to name the most potent of these limits, endows the existent with courage and integrity in that he or she now perceives the structure of reality in its totality, both figure and ground, and is able to formulate his or being upon that perception. When, for example, another nameless visionary narrator surfaces from her limit situation, an encounter with her primal self, she is authentic and self-made, but it is an identity which rests on her precarious understanding of a world which asks and gives "nothing" (Atwood, 231).

A limit situation, then, implies a prohibition, and it is the overcoming of prohibitions which is Kierkegaard's<sup>6</sup> catapult to human freedom. He utilizes the story of Adam and Eve to illustrate the point:

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<sup>6</sup>In this study I will rely more on the work of Kierkegaard than on that of any other philosopher generally recognized as an "existentialist," not only because of the cogency of his insights but also because Kierkegaard is one of the great examples in the western intellectual tradition of an individual who lived his ideas, which is one of the chief values I embrace in chapter one. Nor do I feel any contradiction between Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism and my positing of a Godless universe. My contention in this chapter particularly is that acknowledgement of the void is a key to authentic being and, as I develop the point in subsequent chapters, literary and philosophical texts afford us various strategies for coping with that emptiness and achieving wholeness. Kierkegaard's so-called "leap of faith" is but one way of dealing with that void, a strategy adopted by Miss Lonelyhearts. Moreover, Kierkegaard's affinity with the visionary ethic is reflected by the general disdain in which he was held during his lifetime by the citizens of Copenhagen who saw his ideas and his way of being as a distinct "threat to the order they loved as final" (Hubben, 11).

The prohibition (to not eat the forbidden fruit) induces in (Adam) anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility. What passes by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is nothing--the anxious possibility of being able. He has no conception of what he is able to do...only the possibility of being able is present as a higher form of ignorance, as a higher expression of anxiety, because in a higher sense it both is and is not, because in a higher sense he both loves it and flees from it (CD, 44-5).

Kierkegaard's illustration reminds us that limit situations both destroy (Jaspers speaks of existence "foundering" and "shattering" in these situations) and transcend; Adam and Eve, in choosing a way of being distinct from that ready-made for them and therein exposing their nakedness to the destructive element of God's wrath, transcend the boundaries of their given existence, embracing in their felix culpa the possibility of both the suffering and the joy of existing in full existential awareness of and responsibility for their being in the world<sup>7</sup>. "Man's freedom," writes Jaspers, "is inseparable from his consciousness of his finite nature" (64). "The coming-to-be of the individual begins where the acceptance of the ready-made ends..." (Heller, 20)<sup>8</sup>. Herein perhaps we begin to understand, too, the nature of Stein's

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<sup>7</sup>Implicit in this situation is the same question which any reading of King Lear, another patriarch who confronts a limit situation, must evoke: whether the endurance of suffering to obtain self-knowledge is preferable to sailing safely through existence.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Sartre's disdain for those who would accept "ready-made" values and ways of being in "Portrait of an anti-Semite" quoted in chapter one.

enigmatic advice to Marlow about the importance of submitting to the "destructive element" and making "the deep, deep sea keep you up" (214).

These limit situations, however, do not themselves signal the attainment of freedom and authenticity; they only create the awareness of freedom's possibility. As such, they preface the visionary's existential moment, the defining characteristic of visionary experience. A "crossing over" or threshold experience, the existential moment implies alternative ways of being. It is the vehicle through which Winters' narrator and all visionaries experience the ontological insight that reveals their total situation:

During the three nights that Mrs. Stone had lain below me in the hall, my sensitivity to death, to the obscure and the irrelevant, had been augmented. I felt that I saw farther and farther into the events about me, that I perceived a new region of significance, even of sensation, extending a short distance behind that of which I had always been aware, suggesting the existence of far more than was even now perceptible. This might have unnerved me had it not been for the firmness of the woman in the coffin. In her were united the familiar and the inchoate. The certainty of her expression gave me pause. She was like a friend bidding me be quiet with a raised hand, a friend whose bidding I could trust to be authoritative. But with her departure there remained only the demonic silence which she had introduced, and to which for three nights she had given coherence and meaning (235).

This experience of a sudden and profound awareness of one's condition in the world is significant as both sign and process. It is most immediately a verbal designation of vision; indeed, it was repeated encounters with characters who "saw further and deeper" that first suggested to me the

potential harmony of this body of disparate texts. More importantly, however, the existential moment posits through the character's seeing of that which had been heretofore hidden--"I perceived a new region of significance, even of sensation, extending a short distance behind that of which I had always been aware"--the experience of disillusionment: an awakening to the purpose of the ordering structures and systems of human society which, in the observation of William James "divert our attention from disease and death..., and the slaughterhouses and indecencies without end upon which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is" (90)<sup>9</sup>.

The process of the visionary's "crossing over" from the quotidian to the visionary mode of being may be more readily apprehended by employing the already alluded to idea of figure-ground dichotomies<sup>10</sup>, of which Winters' narrator's perception of the unity of "the familiar and the inchoate" in the corpse of Mrs. Stone is an example. He is confronting here

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<sup>9</sup>One of the most powerful manifestations of this dichotomy between the realms of order and chaos occurs in Hermann Hesse's Demian (1919) and Steppenwolf (1927). The human tendency to repress the realities of disease and death is emblemized in "The Brink of Darkness" by the coffin of the narrator's student, which was "kept closed, from respect for the disease" (238-39).

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of one of the most salient examples of this metaphor in twentieth century fiction see the discussion of "The Blue Hotel" in Appendix "A".

the facticity of death, an awakening to which his landlady's once familiar body acts as mute guide: "The skin was preternaturally and evenly white, and in the wrinkles there seemed a trace as of an underlying darkness, even and impenetrable" (234)<sup>11</sup>. Once her body is removed he must choose how to be in relation to the "demonic silence" her death has revealed.

This trope is augmented--and lent a certain universality--by the presence of the complementary ancient Chinese concept of the Yin-Yang, a concept that has affected virtually every aspect of Chinese thought. Of particular relevance here is its suggestion of a connection between the natural world and human events. At the story's opening, the narrator mentions that mice that would venture out upon the stark winter landscape would be pounced upon and killed by his dogs, "leaving a small spot of blood suspended in grayness" (228); later, in what is essentially the story's climax, the narrator works in the grayness afforded by poor lighting on one of those dogs whose head and mouth are lacerated with porcupine quills. The removal of each quill is followed "by a gush of blood" (239). The encroaching "demonic silence" evoked by the figure-ground image and the inchoate grayness and blood of the Yin-Yang delineate the existential frame for Winters' tale. As Comito observes: "Brightness and shadow,

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. the black storm cloud which almost surreptitiously envelopes the Patna in Lord Jim.

hardness and softness, are continually juxtaposed. They define not so much stages of a cycle as complementary aspects of a single intuition" (18, my emphasis). That intuition is of a universe whose essential nature is violent and dark. Indeed, a character in Beckett's Murphy observes that "All life is figure and ground(4)"; that is, existence is perceived (incorrectly, I will argue) as an unacknowledged dichotomy between those elements a person chooses to acknowledge as real or important or valuable and everything else, which often is designated the "other" or simply the concern of alienists<sup>12</sup>. It is helpful, then, to understand the visionary's power as dialectical or a "single intuition." He or she is able to synthesize the nature and interdependence of both the chaotic,

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<sup>12</sup>Philosophically, the figure-ground metaphor suggests the distinction between the two most predominant western ways of thinking about the human condition in the twentieth century: positivism, which takes science as the arbiter of human life and "dwells in the tiny island of light composed of what (positivist man) finds scientifically 'meaningful,'" (Barrett, 21) and existentialism, which seeks to address the human condition in its totality, emphasizing if anything the encompassing Nothingness of our spiritual and physical condition.

Modern art in general and visionary literature in particular reflect this awareness of the existential void through their flattening out of traditional conceptions of time, space, and subject, and their emphasis upon limit situations. It is when confronted with situations which are "on the far side of what is normal, routine, accepted, traditional, or safeguarded"--when through death, disease or despair we truly see and feel how contingent and fragile our existence is--that the abstract concept of the existential void assumes a numbing concreteness: "Our being reveals itself as much more porous, much less substantial than we had thought it" (Barrett, 62). Moreover, the facile phrase the "tragic condition of humankind" assumes palpability when it is understood that we can only claim our selfhood, our identity and freedom through immersion in these realities.

existential "ground," (which, in his visionary incarnation, can now be "seen"), and that which it surrounds and defines: the "figures" of "norms, requirements, and conventions" (Heller, 26), which constitute our everyday life and whose function is, in fact, the suppression of that very ground<sup>13</sup>.

This "synthesis" is essential to understanding the nature and power of visionaries. In Everyday Life Agnes Heller distinguishes between two modes of being: "particularity" and "individuality." "Particularity" is characterized as the process of accommodating the self to the requirements of "the ready-made world," a world in which the "order of priorities, the scale of values...is largely taken over ready-made" (15); such a way of being emphasizes "self-preservation and subordinates everything else to this self-preservation;" that is, it is a way of being which perceives only the figures which will facilitate the person's preservation (20, emphasis mine). As Heller notes (and experience reminds us) we are all

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<sup>13</sup>Even a cursory survey of the stuff of everyday life reveals the validity of this assertion. That civilization is a record of humankind's battle/holding action against the entropy of nature is revealed in everything from cryogenics to the lane markers on highways. Possibly the apotheosis of this struggle, though, is to be seen in the rise of bureaucracy, whose effects were most potently dramatized in art by Kafka, and in the real world by the Nazis for whom bureaucracy, perhaps not all that ironically, was the sine qua non of the Holocaust: "The light shed by the Holocaust on our knowledge of bureaucratic rationality is at its most dazzling once we realize the extent to which the very idea of the Endlösung (Final Solution) was an outcome of the bureaucratic culture" (Bauman, 15).

subject to the claims of particularity<sup>14</sup>; yet the fruits of particularity as a sole or even primary way of being are illustrated graphically and darkly by the choices based upon preservation of self made by the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101, choices based primarily, it will be recalled, upon the maintenance of their standing in their unit and their future place in the perceived "society" to which they planned to return. Choices, that is, which regarded only the "figures" of a ready-made mode of being while assiduously ignoring and thus perpetrating the existential darkness and chaos that enshrouded and permeated those figures.

Opposed to this, "individuality," according to Heller, is "a development; it is the coming-to-be of an individual," a state in which "the individual does not necessarily wish to preserve himself 'in all circumstances' and 'in any way

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<sup>14</sup>Heller also notes that "in history up to the present, particularity has been the subject of everyday life in the great majority of social orders and social relations. All the material wealth of the world has arisen from the activity of those who 'took things as they come'" (27). In light of the discussion of the Holocaust in chapter one, it is revealing to note the contrast between the United States' massive reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in which Saddam Hussein was characterized as being "worse than Hitler" and its passivity toward the Serbian policy of "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. This would seem, given the economic stakes of each case, a particularly cogent example of Heller's contention. It might finally be noted that neither of these tragedies approaches the on-going human suffering occurring today on the African continent, a situation which seem to befuddle attempts at meaningful action by the rest of the world. Indeed, Somalia's devastating famine is the direct result of the withdrawal of American economic support following the demise of Russian communism. Herein lies an incarnation of the existential concept of "absurdity."

possible'" (20). In other words, faced with a morally unacceptable way of being, the individual will may choose not to be, as in the cases of Bartleby, the Hunger Artist, Edna Pontellier, Mrs. Moore, and Septimus Smith. Heller's "individuality" is a cognate of existentialism's "authenticity," of a self constructed from the individual's personal and conscious choice<sup>15</sup>. Clearly the myriad choices we make "every day" constitute a perpetual morality play that leads us toward or away from our selves.

In visionary literature the blurring of figure-ground distinctions functions as a sign of movement toward authenticity and individuality and as a prelude to vision: boundaries are dissolving; barriers disappearing. In "The Brink of Darkness," it is almost as if the narrator were undergoing a form of ontological ripening, a movement from the phenomenal to the noumenal world, which will allow him to see things as they are, not as he had assumed them to be. Each season he mentions includes a reference to a blurring of

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<sup>15</sup>We may better understand what is at stake here by noting a "universal" example: the glaring incongruity between the persona of Elvis Presley as rock and roll/rhythm and blues icon, and the "plastic" Elvis seen in his movies, where the very rawness and danger of his identity and--inseparably--his talent have been eviscerated and buried beneath inane, "safe" lyrics; a vapid, inauthentic persona; and insipid production values. The question of "What really happened to Elvis" is in this light quite obvious: having relinquished his identity--his way of being--to economically-minded handlers (what Heller would label "particularity"), he realized implicitly that he no longer wanted to be and committed what was tantamount to suicide in the process of obliterating his consciousness to his renunciation of that identity.

figure and ground contours: the fall sees his pet dogs described as "dark vortices, blurred and shapeless"; the summer reveals trees as "black voids growing shadowy and visible at the edges" while two white goats are "trembling watery blotches, barely discernable." A young woman, briefly encountered, is "almost featureless"; a sky appears "unvaulted...without distance or dimension"; mice which emerge from behind his bedroom walls are "shadowy little creatures." The darker it grows, the more he sees the animate and inanimate, the human and nonhuman, figure and ground, in their interrelatedness.

The significance of this dissolution is adumbrated in the narrator's encounter with a pen of yearling coyotes, "the only sign of life amid four hours of snow." The animals, captured to be slaughtered for their fur, "were about ready for killing." They seem, however, wholly oblivious to their fate or condition:

It was strange that they never broke through so slight a fence, yet there they were; young dogs would have torn through it with scarcely a pause, scarcely a sense of an obstacle. But these creatures were innocent and delicate, spirits impeded by a spell, puffs of smoke precise at the tips.

The timid, caged coyotes (by nature an intelligent, radically independent and free breed) form the keystone to a complex of animal-human relationships in the story<sup>16</sup>. Their "innocence"

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<sup>16</sup>In addition to the coyotes, dogs, mice, goats, horses, and a porcupine are mentioned. Perhaps more significantly, the character of Eli, born without forearms and consequently "an

recalls Kierkegaard's equation of that state with "ignorance" in speaking of the Garden of Eden. As with our mythical parents, these creatures are in a dreamstate, a "spell"; they are inauthentic, not themselves (mere "puffs of smoke") for, as Kierkegaard says of Adam and Eve, they have nothing to strive against save Nothingness itself<sup>17</sup>, yet this they disdain or ignore.

Comito's analysis, which describes this incident as one of the story's "most evocatively mysterious episodes," places the coyotes in a favorable ontological light:

What the narrator finds appealing about them is the freshness and insubstantiality of their suddenly flaring identities....They are "innocent" not in any sentimentalist primitive sense but in their vulnerability and fleetingness, without past or future. (21)

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exile from human society," develops in compensation "an unusual sympathy for horses and mules, with whom he could accomplish extraordinary things, and that part of his nature which was not satisfied by this companionship had turned to religion" (233). The alienation that Eli experiences is paralleled by the narrator whose anguish is also mitigated by his observation of housemice and his ministrations to his dogs. However, aside from the solace animals offer in this tale, their plenitude also suggests the ontological proximity of their complementary world, which almost literally is gnawing at the edges of human identity.

<sup>17</sup>"Nothingness" was a (non)state which filled Miguel de Unamuno with a particular dread: "For myself, I can say as a youth and even as a child, I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even then nothing seemed to me quite so horrible as nothingness itself" (9). Existentialist writers, ironically I suppose, write a great deal on the subject of Nothingness, but essentially what they are responding to is the anguish or contingency of being; the anguish that results "whenever the thought comes to us that Nothingness was and still is just as possible as being, whenever we ask ourselves how it is that there is something rather than nothing" (Olson, 31).

While I agree the incident is a key to understanding the story, its significance seems to me quite different from that suggested by Comito<sup>18</sup>. Indeed I would argue the coyotes' condition to be one of despair and intended to foreshadow the narrator's own failure of authenticity; like the coyotes, he will choose to deny his freedom and not become himself by retreating into the safety of the "limits of my old identity"<sup>19</sup>. The self, Kierkegaard teaches us, the individual

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<sup>18</sup>One might be curious, first of all, how an "identity" can be simultaneously "insubstantial" and "flaring." Moreover, to be "without past or future" is to be the ontological equivalent of the prelapsarian Adam and Eve, which is to say to lack will, freedom, identity itself, none of which can be attained without the breaking of prohibitive psycho-social barriers.

<sup>19</sup>This type of boundary-drawing, cited by Bauman as a "universal cultural activity," is one of the chief strategies individuals and societies have of maintaining an ersatz sense of order. Surely the prime historical example of its almost metaphysical power is found in the endurance of anti-Semitism, a timeless tragedy made up on the one hand of the Jews' fierce refusal to relinquish their identity as Jews and the diaspora which forced Jews across countless geographical boundaries, and on the other of those native to those boundaries, primarily Christians, whose "self-identity was, in fact, estrangement from the Jews." Their identity, then, was dependent on the other, not on their own choices and actions:

It was born of the rejection by the Jews. It drew its continuous vitality from the rejection of the Jews. Christianity could theorize its own existence only by an on-going opposition to the Jews. Continuing Jewish stubbornness bore evidence that the Christian mission remained as yet unfinished.

Moreover, what Bauman terms the "conceptual Jew" of Christian imagination became the visualization of the

...horrifying consequences of boundary-transgression, of not remaining fully in the fold, of any conduct short of unconditional loyalty and unambiguous choice; he was the prototype and arch-

whom through our actions and decisions we create, is freedom. To renounce that freedom, to refuse to become ourselves, is the kind of despair that

allows itself to be, so to speak, cheated of its self by the "others." By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name; dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer being like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd. (emphasis mine)

This situation, Kierkegaard wryly observes, "goes practically unnoticed in the world. Precisely by losing himself in this way, such a person gains all that is required for a flawless performance in everyday life:

Far from anyone thinking him to be in despair, he is just what a human being ought to be. Naturally the world has no understanding of what is truly horrifying. The despair that not only does not cause any inconvenience in life, but makes life convenient and comfortable, is naturally enough in no way regarded as despair. (SD, 63-4)

In Kierkegaard's view, such individuals "lack primitiveness." It is a suggestive phrase, for a key element in "The Brink of

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pattern of all nonconformity, heterodoxy, anomaly and aberration....The conceptual Jew carried a message: alternative to this order here and now is not another order, but chaos and devastation. (Bauman, 38-9)

The irony of this, as I hope to make clear, is that chaos is the result of the erasure of artificial and irrational boundaries, but it is only through immersion in that chaos that true salvation--by which I mean the achievement of authenticity--can be realized. The danger of both Jew and visionary to quotidian reality lies in their ability to expose the inauthenticity of identities which rely on the artificiality of boundaries.

Darkness," as with most other visionary texts<sup>20</sup>, is just such a rediscovery of the primitive, an immersion into Stein's "destructive element." In the same way that The Sickness Unto Death is an anatomy of despair, the caged coyotes are to be seen as an evolutionarily distinct breed from the narrator's dogs<sup>21</sup> ("young dogs would have torn through [that fence] with scarcely a pause") who, later in the story, bolt into the wilderness for several days only to return from their encounter with the destructive element "emaciated and limping," their heads and throats covered in porcupine quills. The narrator's ministrations to the dogs are graphic and horrible; in effect a blood rite whose very concreteness (Cf. the coyotes being likened to "puffs of smoke") reconnects him to something visceral and (Kierkegaard's term) "primitive" to his humanness. The scene emblemizes the palpable danger of the destructive element, and acts as a paradigm for the possibility of the narrator's own achievement of authenticity.

"I was prepared for this kind of return," the narrator says of his dogs' reappearance, and an essential part of that preparation is a second existential moment, which reveals not the world but himself. The world for the narrator--as it was

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. "Act of Faith"'s emphasis on an almost primordial sea of mud that engulfs the army camp or the equally ancient Marabar Caves in A Passage to India; Miss Lonelyheart's trip to the country; the jungle settings of The Voyage Out, Lord Jim, and Lord of the Flies or the return to the wilderness in Surfacing.

<sup>21</sup>Genetically, of course, domestic dogs and coyotes share the same genus; indeed, the coyote is the ancestor of the dog.

for Emil Sinclair--has been circumscribed into two realms: upstairs, in his actual living quarters where he reads and eats and sleeps, are life and comfort, "the dogs and the stove," the figures of everyday life; below, where the body of his deceased landlady has lain, is "echoing desolation," the ground of the existential void. One night he ventures into this "demonic" zone for a glass of water. His footsteps resound with "great volume...as if I were walking (in my room)." In the kitchen he stands before a window, "bright emptiness behind (him)":

I stared at the smooth surface of the snow thus suddenly revealed to me, like a new meaning not divisible into any terms I knew. Again I had the illusion of seeing myself in the empty room, in the same light, frozen to my last footprints, cold and unmeaning. A slight motion caught my eye, and I glanced up at the darkened corner of the window, to be fixed with horror. There, standing on the outside of the window, translucent, a few lines merely, and scarcely visible, was a face, my face, the eyes fixed upon my own. I moved on quickly to the kitchen; the reflection started and vanished.  
(238)

The sudden depth of vision ("suddenly revealed to me like a new meaning not divisible into any terms I knew") which signals the existential moment is again present as he perceives the formless ground in the undifferentiated winter landscape; the passage's diction--"empty," "frozen," "cold and unmeaning"--suggests the emotional and metaphysical despair vision encompasses; and the face he encounters--a "figure" of "a few lines merely"--recalls that of Mr. Stone, which, upon his wife's death, is described as "pale and lifeless,

f(a)ll(ing) away in heavy lines" (231). But most indicative of this visionary is his characterization of the experience as an "illusion" and his retreat to another room, foreshadowing his subsequent retreat to Colorado, another "state," a different set of "boundaries" within which he can attempt to elude the consequences of what he sees.

Clearly, Winters has carefully qualified the scene; the face the narrator perceives is but "a few lines, and scarcely visible," and, after all, we must ask, whose face would one expect to see reflected in a window but one's own? The temptation is thus strong to read this text--largely devoid as it is in narrative logic and linear development--as a psychological curiosity<sup>22</sup>, or perhaps one man's exorcism of his personal demons. Comito points out that Winters himself was "annoyed by naturalistic explanations (17)" of the story. Indeed, such a reading is reductive for the themes Winters addresses have a resonance not only for other visionary texts but much more importantly for our lives beyond the text. "The real themes of (the story)," argues Comito, "are moral and metaphysical: the precariousness of identity and the ambiguity of the universe by which it is threatened" (4). That is, the story prompts the reader's confrontation with Augustine's question "Who am I," and takes it one step further: how do I

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<sup>22</sup>I first encountered this story in a graduate course on "Madness in Literature."

survive, much less thrive, in a universe at best indifferent, at worst inimical to that identity<sup>23</sup>?

It is not surprising then that as a result of his experience of vision, the narrator literally asks himself Augustine's question: "I sometimes wondered who I was" (235), but he falters and finally withdraws before the implications of the answer:

I thought back over the past months, of the manner in which I had been disturbed, uncentered, and finally obsessed as by an insidious power. I remembered that I had read somewhere of a kind of Eastern demon who gains power over one only in proportion<sup>24</sup> as one recognizes and fears him. I felt that I had been the victim of a deliberate and malevolent invasion, an invasion utilizing and augmenting to appalling and shadowy proportions all of the most elusive accidents of my life, my new penumbra of perception thus rendering to what would otherwise have appeared the contingent the effect of coherent and cumulative meaning. Finally through some miscalculations on the part of the invader, or through some other accident, I had begun to recover the limits of my old identity. I had begun this recovery at the time of the immersion in the brute blood of the bitch. The invading power I could not identify, I felt it near me still, but slowly receding. (244, emphasis mine).

The narrator's "reading" of his experience seems a patent example of what Sartre terms "bad faith" or "self-deception";

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<sup>23</sup>In an author's footnote to an edition of this story, Winters wrote "that this story is a study of the hypothetical possibility of a hostile supernatural world, and of the effect on the perceptions of a consideration of this possibility" (Powell, 45).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. the refrain of "proportion" and "reasonableness," which is urged upon Rachel Vinrace in The Voyage Out. In the quotidian view, to maintain one's sense of proportion is to effectively obviate the possibility of confronting one's "demons."

it is a choice of how to be which represses if not outright denies the narrator's knowledge of his fragility and contingency within the gray indifference of his universe; in making that choice, he denies his freedom and becomes inauthentic. His retreat into the "limits" of his former self is an ontological circling of the wagons, an action similar in kind analogically to the coyotes and intertextually to Charlie Marlow's in Heart of Darkness in that, confronted by the implications of the darkness, both men lie<sup>25</sup>. The narrator stands before the brink of the abyss as his students had stood before their deceased classmate, "looking curiously young and helpless" and in so doing he betrays his psychic immaturity. The objectifying of the narrator's "problem" by the reference to an "insidious force" and the tenuous attribution of his "recovery" to the demon's "miscalculations...or through some other accident..." is a species of dissembling, a repression which Kierkegaard sees as ultimately damning: "...learning to know dread is an adventure which every man has to confront if he would not go to perdition either by not having known dread or by sinking under it. He therefore who has learned rightly to be in dread has learned the most important thing" ("Dread," 252).

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<sup>25</sup>Clearly there is a considerable difference in degree between Marlow's (who travels to the very heart of darkness) and the narrator's experience of vision. Marlow receives "just a glimpse" while Winters' narrator is, as it were, fully immersed in the destructive element of existential awareness. Nonetheless their respective reactions to the darkness are essentially similar.

To read the conclusion of "Brink of Darkness" in this way is to subvert what seems to be occurring. The narrator, after all, does recover the "figure" of his old self, a recovery whose inception lies in his care of his badly hurt animals, an action palpably human and humane. But the vocabulary of visionary literature is singular: when he notes, in speaking of the disorder of his room, "I was busy and very tired and slowly lost the habit of noticing" (240), one might recall Marlow's observation that he, too, did not go ashore for "a howl and a dance" because, with the myriad tasks of his boat, "(He) had no time....neither that fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts" (HD, 106-07). The work of the quotidian world becomes a means of deflecting vision and alienating us from understanding our condition and ourselves. Indeed, Winter's concluding image of a plow--"a tiny iron thing crawling rapidly in straight lines across the hills"--resonates with Marlow's image of his "little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico" toward an impenetrable darkness (104). The plow is driven by Eli, and Terry Comito sees in the deformed man's " 'strange movements' the agency of a resourcefulness (the narrator) will himself need in the continuing struggle he foresees. For a moment at least he feels the sunshine" (16). But the illusory nature of both the narrator's claim to "recovery" and of even Comito's guarded optimism is made unequivocal earlier in the story's final paragraph where the

figure-ground dichotomy is again manifested: "I could not blink my eyes without being conscious of the darkness....It was as if there was darkness underlying the brightness of the air, underlying everything, as if I might slip into it at any instant, and as if I held myself where I was by an act of will from moment to moment" (242). The narrator's removal to Colorado from which he "would never return" is an act of "particularity," of self-preservation. Unlike Yeats' visionary in "The Second Coming," Winters' narrator emerges from his vision willfully empty-handed; unlike Leda, who also experienced the "brute blood," he has put on no knowledge.

I would suggest, however, that we have been prepared for the narrator's act of bad faith by his uses of reading, always a key component of visionary texts. The narrator mentions, in a most offhanded way, that he is a teacher, which is to say that by definition he is a reader. There is, moreover, a single reference to the narrator's actually reading: "While the dogs were gone, I spent as much of my nights as I could in reading" (237). Because Winter's tale is cut not from the "figures" of everyday life but instead from the enveloping existential "ground," these are two of the few facts of an expository or mundane nature offered in the story and as such accrue to themselves a special significance. The narrator wishes to remain awake because of his concern over his dogs' venture into the countryside, and reading, rather than inculcating a moral consciousness, becomes merely a means of

maintaining a physiological state much in the manner of the initial voice in The Wasteland, who "read(s) much of the night, and go(es) south in the winter"; that is, reading is a way of denying the darkness rather than a means of apprehending it.

What is particularly interesting in this regard is the narrator's reference to the "insidious power's" use "of all the most elusive accidents of (his) life...thus rendering to what would otherwise have appeared the contingent the effect of coherent and cumulative meaning." I believe that what seems to be a reference to the protagonist's life (of which we know next to nothing) is, in fact, a commentary on the reader's experience of the story itself. As suggested earlier, "The Brink of Darkness" is essentially a series of impressionistic details ("elusive accidents") held together, I would argue, by the reader's own "penumbra of perception"; that is, the ability of a virtually structureless story to achieve not only coherence and meaning but indeed power is "contingent" only on my now awakened sense of a narrative logic which transcends traditional "limits." When I am aware of this story as an example of visionary literature, I perceive the causal relationship among the protagonist's formerly disparate impressions. "The Brink of Darkness" "uncenters" my sense of what a fiction should be and do and in the process teaches me to see a narrative and myself in a new and possibly truer way. To use E.M. Forster's distinction, what had been a story, a

mere amalgamation of events, becomes a plot, a group of interrelated occurrences. I maintain that the reader-oriented structures and existential themes of visionary fictions are in fact moral exercises which prompt us to reexamine the narrative logic of our own lives, to discover their "plots," to construct meaning from what may only seem to be "elusive accidents."

Through their insistence upon the kind of engaged reading I mentioned in chapter one, visionary fictions and their first cousins, epiphanic fictions, foster this kind of moral exercising. Indeed, the epiphanic fictions of Dubliners are some of the great examples in modern literature of art's ability to enhance our moral vision. Mirroring the experience of visionary awakening, Dubliners' stories, which frequently end in medias res, consistently subvert the reader's accustomed and comfortable expectations, even insistence, of discovering meaning in all the old familiar places. In cumulative effect, Joyce's willful non-endings teach the reader to transform the grammar of meaning from the arena of the "figure," (the actual black-charactered words upon the white page) where complication leads to climax and reassuring resolution, to that of the decidedly more unstable "ground," (the whiteness of the page: the gaps between words extending to the very margins of the page and beyond, perhaps, to our daily lives) where "meaning" as such becomes a much more problematical (and personal) entity.

The moral thrust of Dubliners's stories extends, of course, far beyond the provincialism of Dublin society. In "Counterparts," Joyce relates the ontological death of Farrington, a law copyist paralyzed between his unarticulated dreams and his submergence into alcoholic stupor, which, along with his wife's reliance upon religion, form Joyce's Scylla and Charbydis of Irish paralysis. But the numerous references to Farrington as the generic "man" alert us to the universal implications of this story, extending its connections beyond father and son to text and reader until the full and main intent of its title hits the reader with the delayed epiphanic impact of Eliot's (via Baudelaire) "You hypocrite lecturer!" We as readers are surely part of the "race" whose conscience Stephen/Joyce seeks to create, in part, through circumventing ways of being like Farrington's.

Robert Scholes suggests as much in noting that in our encounters with "Counterparts," "we develop and refine our consciences" (emphasis mine) and compares the experience of reading Dubliners as a whole with reading Saint Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises:

The evaluation of motive and responsibility in these stories...must inevitably lead the reader beyond any easy orthodoxy. These case histories encourage us to exercise our spirits, develop our consciences: to accept the view that morality is a matter of individual responses to particular situations rather than an automatic invocation of religious or ethical rules of thumb. (382, emphasis mine)

In "Counterparts" meaning evolves from meaninglessness; in effect--like Scholes' valorization of individual choice and responsibility over unreflecting "ethical rules of thumb"<sup>26</sup>--an existential exercise. Farrington is identified both by others and himself as knowing nothing:

--I know nothing about any two letters, (Farrington) said stupidly.

--You--know--nothing. Of course you know nothing, said Mr. Alleyne. Tell me, he added...do you take me for a fool? Do you take me for an utter fool?

The twin questions of "how/whether to be" are made central here through the story's implicit connections with two works which are visionary archetypes: first, the above passage's repetitions of "Nothing" and "fool" echo King Lear<sup>27</sup> as Farrington's relinquishing of moral authority to alcohol and (through his wife) the church recalls Lear's own abrogation of moral responsibility. All this is prelude to Farrington's Lear-like descent into the maelstrom of wrath, personal oblivion, fear and loathing. But as is characteristic of much of the literature of the high modernist era and in

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. "ready-made" ways of being.

<sup>27</sup>See note 6. Lear's existential moments occur, I would suggest, on the heath in his vision of human suffering and in his shocks of recognition regarding the true natures of both Goneril and Regan, who possess the "figures" of women but are "beneath...all the fiend's" (IV, vi, 128). Again, the key is that these awakenings reveal an existential universe along the lines I defined in chapter one. Of course, Lear, like Winters' narrator and Bartleby, is more often than not labeled as mad. I am reminded, however, of Nietzsche's saying "all worthwhile thought risks madness" and also of McCall's citing Melville's frequent observation that "seeing the world for the monstrous place it is, is what drives one mad" (51).

particular that of Joyce himself, the heroic and tragic have been eviscerated and enervated: There will be neither spiritual renewal nor self-knowledge for the likes of Farrington who remains benighted, his eyes perpetually "heavy" and "dirty," virtually an anti-visionary state; indeed, Farrington is even denied the physical conquest granted the eighty year old Lear over Cordelia's slayer: in his abiding rage he only "gauges the fragility" of his employer's "polished skull"; he does not act. Rather his physical prowess is reduced to a child's test of arm-wrestling with a drinking companion, a match he loses ignominiously.

"Counterparts" concludes with one of the stark images of circularity which conjure Irish paralysis in Dubliners: Farrington's son kneels before him proffering a "Hail Mary" if his father will refrain from beating him. Like several of Dubliners's stories, this seems a non-ending, devoid of the moral symmetry and catharsis of a Lear. However, the epiphany (perhaps deferred until the collection's final story or even until the completion of multiple readings) is the reader's: the elements which--in Joyce's view--constitute Ireland's moral paralysis--alcohol and religion--are revealed here as incipient and insidious in the next generation. There is, we sense, no other way to be in the prisonhouse of Dublin.

However, the most powerful visionary connection offered in "Counterparts" is precipitated by Farrington's absorption--indeed, his reverie--with a line he is copying, an "incomplete

phrase: in no case shall the said Bernard Bodley be..."(90). Farrington's position as a law office copyist and Joyce's penchant for wordplay might suggest "Bernard Bodley" as an anagram for Bartleby, Melville's nineteenth century scrivener<sup>28</sup>, whose own name suggests a hindrance to being, whose drama plays out in a setting--Wall Street--which connotes a prison, and whose death occurs in a literal prison. As Farrington is defined by "nothingness" and foolishness, Bartleby is defined by phrases which name his prescience: "I know you" (i.e. the tale's narrator and, by extension, the reader) and "I know where I am." Moreover, Bartleby knows that which he needs for spiritual survival: a pattern or way--a copy--of being: upon his hiring, Bartleby falls to his task as if "long famished for something to copy." But such spiritual food as his milieu provides him proves, as it does for a visionary like Kafka's hunger artist, thin gruel indeed. Thus do both Bartleby<sup>29</sup> and Kafka's fantastic artist starve to death amidst an abundance of food.

Both Melville's and Joyce's short stories may also be read as fables about learning to read and as cautionary tales

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<sup>28</sup>Although the resuscitation of Moby Dick's reputation did not begin until 1917, knowledge and admiration of the book were evident among members of Joyce's Parisian circle during the time the author was completing Dubliners. Whether Joyce had actually read "Bartleby," however, I have been unable to ascertain.

<sup>29</sup>Several commentators on the story have noted its preponderance of eating imagery. See McCall (pages 40-4) for a good summary.

about the inherent pitfalls in the gaps any reader will encounter within and between words. It is within those gaps--the blank spaces that surround the words' characters--that the ground of literary and, by extension, ontological inquiry resides<sup>30</sup>. Farrington simply never cracks the code. His first encounter with the "incomplete phrase: In no case shall the said Bernard Bodley be..." inaugurates his day's drinking, a patent form of ontological retreat (his way of going to "Colorado"); his second attempt leads to a rhetorical analysis--"(he) thought how strange it was that the last three words began with the same letter"--but he is never able to apprehend or willing to confront the significance of the phrase's content. Farrington, in the simplest terms, is a poor reader, in effect disappearing among the phrase's gaps, never to resurface unless in the form of a son tragically intent on copying the patterns his parents present him. Within those gaps is the "nothingness" which Farrington claims to know. And he does, on a quotidian level of humiliation and insult, know the searing scourge of nothingness. But on the visionary level of actually seeing into, embracing and surmounting that nothingness, Farrington is profoundly blind and impotent, incapable of articulating or interpreting what he reads.

Bartleby, however, embodies the "postal principle"; the dead letters he at onetime processed deliver their grim

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<sup>30</sup>I will incorporate Iser's theory of reading into my later chapters.

message; he knows where he is and his dead wall reveries--his limit situation--only serve as objective correlatives to his spiritual desolation. The story's frequent references to Bartleby's deteriorating eyesight--his "eyestrain"--attest to the diligence of his "reading" of his world<sup>31</sup>. Bartleby, too, disappears into the gaps of his "text," albeit his plunge into the destructive element, as has been suggested, is taken in full and tragic consciousness of a desire (a "preference") to no longer be.

Bartleby's character may be distinguished by three qualities: his isolation ("...he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe"), his silence, and his dignity. His silence--as both cause and effect of the unnamed "incurable disorder" from which he suffers--is one of literature's most eloquent and darkest pronouncements. As McCall puts it, "the repeated answer to our question (of what is wrong with Bartleby), and the profoundest, is silence" (58). But most significant, I would argue, is Bartleby's unyielding dignity in the face of his knowledge of that silence and aloneness<sup>32</sup>. In his refusal to compromise himself through immersion, like

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<sup>31</sup>What Bartleby literally reads, of course, are legal documents, a bulwark, if you will, of the quotidian life in general and of boundary-drawing in particular. The fragility of such structures is amply demonstrated by the havoc engendered by one recalcitrant scrivener.

<sup>32</sup>McCall quotes John Haig, an actor who played Bartleby in a movie version of the story, that listing "the most important qualities of the character as I came to him...I think I would commence with Dignity. Bartleby's personal dignity never falters before the world" (57).

Farrington, in a life of dissolution and wrath or through accepting the lawyer's offer of material succor or through retreating--like Winters' narrator--from the implications of his vision, Bartleby emerges as an existential archetype of Camus' question--one who knows himself, his condition and, in his authenticity, shows us one response to the universe's silence. The remaining chapters will explore the dynamics--the ways of being--of four visionary heroes who choose a "condemnation to freedom" and a pursuit of authenticity over suicide and bad faith.

### CHAPTER III

#### FIGURING THE GROUNDS OF EXISTENTIAL BEING: FAITH IN TWO VISIONARY FICTIONS

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in;--and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to an anxious trembling. (William James)

All life is figure and ground. (Samuel Beckett)

Art is a way out. (Miss Lonelyhearts)

The "dead letters" which Melville's narrator speculates as the cause of Bartleby's fatal melancholia are made flesh in both Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts and Irwin Shaw's "Act of Faith." Both of the latter works turn on their visionary protagonists' reading of letters, which are simultaneously narratives of despair--raw, authentic pleas for spiritual help and ontological direction--and revelatory documents which inspire faith in both their fictional and ideal readers. For Miss Lonelyhearts and Seeger, the visionary hero of "Act of Faith," letters mark an immersion into the destructive element of existential awareness and the subsequent struggle toward selfhood and identity, which define visionary experience; their reading mirrors our own reading of visionary fictions in which we see the visionary grow toward selfhood, and experience the enhancement of our own vision, of our own possibilities for being.

While Miss Lonelyhearts is one of the masterworks of twentieth century American fiction<sup>1</sup>, Shaw's "Act of Faith" enjoys--justifiably--a much more modest reputation. Yet I hope to show that when viewed within the framework of visionary fiction, it, too, acquires a narrative dynamism. The complex

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Edgar Hyman calls the book "one of the three finest American novels of our century" (27). Harold Bloom contends that except for the greatest Faulkner, no other American fiction writer in this century "can be said to have surpassed Miss Lonelyhearts" (1). It is noteworthy that West's critical reputation parallels Melville's, both having suffered years of critical neglect (West's reputation wasn't revived until the mid fifties). For an intriguing Westian allusion to "Bartleby," see p.98.

of characteristics which define visionary works is manifest throughout both works. As is characteristic of the interiority and subjectiveness of visionary fictions, the plots of these works are sparse<sup>2</sup>; Victor Comerchero observes that "within two pages after the novel begins...Miss Lonelyhearts' problem is quite clear: how does he answer the letters (he receives as an advice columnist) when the letters are "no longer funny?" (74). This is indeed the quotidian manifestation of Miss Lonelyhearts' conflict<sup>3</sup>--with a slight but I think significant visionary alteration: as I will demonstrate below, Miss Lonelyhearts' problem is clear in the book's first paragraph: how does he respond to the letters when he perceives them to be authentic manifestations of the human condition, of his own condition? To no longer be amused by the letters does not necessarily imply action, but to see them as reflections of one's condition in the world demands a response. Miss Lonelyhearts turns on the anxiety inherent in that response. Similarly, in "Act of Faith," Shaw utilizes a faux plot of American soldiers at the end of World War II trying to gather funds for a weekend in Paris to prepare the reader psychologically to experience Seeger's existential moment upon

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<sup>2</sup>A distinction should be made here between fictions which contain visionary characters like Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India and those (the majority) whose protagonists are visionaries.

<sup>3</sup>A truer sense of the book's conflict would be to say that it is the problem of becoming a Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith; that is, of making the absurdity of faith keep one afloat in the existential void.

receipt of his father's letter. With that moment the story moves from the objective world of events to the subjective experience of Seeger's vision and again turns on his profound anxiety before the necessity of choosing how to be. Each story offers a leap of faith as answer to the existential drama of discovering meaning in meaninglessness. As exemplars of that chaos each setting is a holocaust: that of the Nazis in Europe and that of the human spirit in West's nihilistic vision of America. Again, the letters reflect and resonate with those tragedies. Finally each story employs a motif to illustrate the process of vision: in Miss Lonelyhearts, figure-ground dichotomies; in "Act of Faith," Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."

By far the greatest depth of darkness revealed in these stories is of the human heart itself. Augustine has written, "If by 'abyss' we understand a great depth, is not man's heart an abyss? For what is there more profound than that abyss? Men may speak, may be seen by the operation of their members, may be heard speaking; but whose thought is penetrated, whose heart is seen into?...Do not you believe that there is in man a deep so profound as to be hidden even from him in who it is?" (Przywara, 421). Augustine describes here a condition of despair, in which, manifestly, all visionaries share. But Kierkegaard teaches us that all people are in despair and that we are differentiated only by our consciousness of and response to that despair. It is this consciousness or

awareness or vision and the choices for one's being contingent upon it that constitute the significance of visionary experience for us as readers.

It is, then, against and within this profound depth of darkness that each visionary must struggle to fathom his or her own heart; to establish an identity; to become oneself; which, Kierkegaard argues, is the fundamental responsibility of each individual. That self, as I indicated earlier, is not encoded in a genetic blueprint nor is it anything as universal as "human nature"; rather, it is a moral choice--an act of will--made by the individual to transcend one's merely natural self; to choose a self capable of attaining wholeness and coherence and to live up to the fulfillment of that choice. The ways in which that end may be realized through either divine grace or human autonomy is the object of the two visionary stories I have chosen to examine in this chapter.

For the visionaries in "Bartleby," Miss Lonelyhearts and "Act of Faith," the process of becoming oneself begins with the reading of letters. Whereas in Melville's treatment, the "stillborn errands of life" had been abstractions borne of the narrator's need to find meaning in Bartleby's fate, Miss Lonelyhearts' letters are rendered in lurid detail:

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts--

I am sixteen years old now and I dont know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the

block making fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose--although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she cries terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didnt do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?

Sincerely Yours,  
Desperate

The reader will immediately recognize Camus' "one truly serious philosophical problem" which "Desperate" instinctively understands to be a possible response to her original question of "how to be" and to her pervading, insistent, unfulfilled desire to attach some pattern of meaning to her condition<sup>4</sup>. These questions form a refrain throughout the letters, becoming an almost formulaic plea for guidance: "I don't know what to do...Tell me what to do...What would you do?"<sup>5</sup> It is the cumulative effect of their repetition that triggers Miss Lonelyhearts' existential moment and subsequent conversion

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<sup>4</sup>This is the same ontological need that drove Melville's narrator to speculate on Bartleby's career in the dead letter office.

<sup>5</sup>Precisely this refrain will reappear in Lord Jim.

from living in the quotidian plane to the visionary, an evolution he tries to explain to his fiance, Betty:

A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (32)

Miss Lonelyhearts' "examined life"<sup>6</sup> signifies his conversion from an existence confined to and sheltered by the concerns and rhythms of everyday life to one defined by an awareness of existence as enveloped by existential darkness. The profundity of this conversion cannot be overstated. It is perhaps tempting to dismiss one's proclamation of an "examination of life" as trite or facile, but I would point out that, first, by this point in the work nothing approaches ease for West's bewildered protagonist; second, as a visionary work, West's book is structured upon the very principle of "seeing"--and an

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<sup>6</sup>Implicit here, of course, is Socrates' dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps the obviousness of this allusion explains its absence from critical commentary on the book, yet the centrality of this idea to Miss Lonelyhearts and visionary fictions in general cannot be overstated. While West's acknowledged debt to James' The Varieties of Religious Experience has attracted considerable and warranted commentary, the real genealogy here is Kierkegaard by way of Socrates. Kierkegaard's dictum "become oneself" is, in essence, his translation of Socrates' "know thyself."

examination is, of course, a way of seeing; and third, and most significantly, a merely ironic if not cynical response to Miss Lonelyhearts' spiritual quest<sup>7</sup> repeats the cycle of sterility represented by Shrike, a cycle from which the visionary paradigm is capable of freeing us.

Moreover, Miss Lonelyhearts carries a significant history of having in the past denied the implications of his visions:

As a boy in his father's church, he discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful. He had played with this thing, but had never allowed it to come alive.

He names this force "hysteria" and images it as "a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life." Staring at his crucifix, he again begins to chant Christ's name, "but the moment the snake started to uncoil in his brain, he became frightened and closed his eyes" (8-9). This is an instance of what Kierkegaard would label the awakening of "possibility," which is the force capable of taking the individual beyond "necessity" (the force opposite possibility, and located in the world<sup>8</sup>) and beyond himself and out of despair. For Kierkegaard possibility is incarnated in God: "The decisive thing is: for God everything is possible."

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<sup>7</sup>Comerchero explores the influence of Jessie Weston's work on the Grail Legend on Miss Lonelyhearts; see pp. 86-92. At one point a character asks Miss Lonelyhearts for "the nature of (his) quest" (17).

<sup>8</sup>"Becoming oneself is a movement one makes just where one is. Becoming is a movement from some place, but becoming oneself is a movement at that place" (SUD, 66).

The question for the individual "is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will have faith" (SUD,68). It is faith that we come to understand through Kierkegaard to be the sine quo non that keeps the individual afloat in Stein's destructive element:

Whether the person who thus contends goes under depends entirely on whether he gets hold of a possibility, that is to say, on whether he will have faith....This is what is dialectical in having faith. In general all a person knows is that this and that, as he hopes and expects, etc., is not going to happen to him. If it does, he goes under. The foolhardy person throws himself deliberately into danger, where the possibility may also be this and that; and if it happens, he despairs and goes under. The believer sees and understands his undoing (in what has befallen him and what he risks) in human terms, but he has faith. Therefore he does not go under. The manner in which he is able to be helped he leaves wholly to God, but he believes for God everything is possible. To believe in his own undoing is impossible. To grasp that humanly it is his undoing and yet believe in possibility is to have faith. (SUD, 69)

It is particularly important to understand that for Kierkegaard as well as for the visionaries in this study "personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity"; that is, the ways of being the individual can imagine are only valuable in so far as he can bring them to fruition in the world (necessity). One must live one's possibilities. This raises an important point as well in understanding what I have termed the "quotidian". The quotidian mode of being is not defined by actions but by attitude. It is to live, as Kierkegaard says of those who lack possibility, "devoid of imagination...within a certain orbit of trivial experience as

to how things come about, what is possible, what usually happens, no matter whether (one) is a tapster or a prime minister" (SUD, 71). It is, in contradistinction to vision, a way of blindness. The goal of realizing personhood, then, in my own terms, is to live one's daily life in vision (of a violent but indifferent universe) kept afloat through the infusion of a secular or divine grace. The visionary and everyday worlds must be made one.

The terrifying vision Miss Lonelyhearts closes his eyes to above is an instance of the denial of possibility, a flight from freedom, which is to be in despair. But without question this instance of vision has strong affinities with madness. Kierkegaard defines faith as "the formula for losing one's mind; to have faith is precisely to lose one's mind so as to win God" (68). Indeed, the leap of faith is based upon an absurd assumption and is therefore especially susceptible to denial. The snake with which West images Miss Lonelyhearts' incipient vision is a powerful and ambiguous symbol suggesting, perhaps, madness or sexual energy but, most potently, evil. Now clearly evil seems an incongruous result to his invocation of Christ<sup>9</sup>. However, it is precisely Miss

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<sup>9</sup>Carroll Schoenewolf argues that West sees the religious experience itself as "at best meaningless...at worst, evil." In addition to the snake image, he cites Miss Lonelyhearts' characterization of his experience as "hysteria" and its being "an accomplice to homicide." Certainly meaninglessness and evil are a cogent presence in this work; however, they are a part of the existential fabric of West's vision of the human condition, not an outgrowth of his protagonist's religious experience. The snake image is a manifestation of Miss

Lonelyhearts' acute perception of evil that is the genesis of his troubles; that is, his sense of Christ as "the answer" is inseparable from his vision of the universe as predatory in the same way that one's faith is contingent upon the maintenance of doubt. Regardless of his lineage as the "son of a Baptist minister," the relentlessness of his Christ obsession is directly proportional to his deepening vision of and impotence before his existential situation<sup>10</sup>.

What is equally clear is that his vision is revived through his correspondents' suffering as manifested in their letters, the reading of which again accentuates his own spiritual longing; repeatedly he is seen seeking on a

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Lonelyhearts' consciousness of evil; it is not a conflation of evil with Christ. While Miss Lonelyhearts' belief that "Christ is the answer" may, indeed, prove ineffectual in effecting happiness for him or his correspondents, it remains an act of authenticity, a becoming of Miss Lonelyhearts true self, which he had heretofore repressed.

<sup>10</sup>The visionary's courage in facing the abyss is characteristic of his ontological status. Conversely, James argues that "if a creed makes a man feel happy, he almost inevitably adopts it. Such a belief ought to be true; therefore it is true--such, rightly or wrongly, is one of the immediate 'inferences' of the religious logic used by ordinary men" (78-9). The question of Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ obsession as a case of "bad faith" also needs attention; that is, is his conjuring of Christ imagery in response to his vision of the human condition as tragic and permeated by suffering merely a defence against the void, a positing of the inauthentic? I think not for two reasons: first, the text makes it clear that the idea of Christ has been a palpable and personal presence for Miss Lonelyhearts since his boyhood; indeed, his denial of his spiritual impulses strikes me as the true instance of the inauthentic. Second, as Camus points out, one must answer, which is to say each of us must discover an authentic stance with which to face the void. For Miss Lonelyhearts, as for Kierkegaard, that stance is Christian.

quotidian level the answer to "what to do?"<sup>11</sup> Miss Lonelyhearts can not only see but also can empathize with the chaos that laps at the borders of everyday life. Alienated by his vision, he is no longer at home in the world, which cannot supply him with the spiritual sustenance he so desperately needs. Thus his "examination of values" marks an existential threshold that once crossed, denies him the sanctuary of blindness. Both Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts' fiance, and Shrike, his diabolical editor, name avenues of escape from his enveloping despair. Betty even suggests a career in advertising, an industry whose raison d'etre is the warping of truth through the manufacture of an ersatz and sanitized reality. But there is no escape or return to a habitual way of being: "I can't quit," Miss Lonelyhearts replies. "And even if I were able to quit, it wouldn't make any difference. I wouldn't be able to forget the letters no matter what I did" (31-2).

But what is the power that these letters harbor? Consider the psychological, emotional, and moral consequences of a committed reading of and response to the epistolary narratives Miss Lonelyhearts receives, a reading, that is, which views these stories and the lives they recount as

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<sup>11</sup>"Unable to think of anything else to do, he now repeated the gesture" (12). "In the street, Miss Lonelyhearts wondered what to do next" (13). "Made sad by the pause between playing and eating, he had gone to the piano and had begun a piece by Mozart" (15). "Although he had tried hot water, whisky, coffee, exercise, he had completely forgotten sex" (19). "...out of desperation, (he) went to the telephone to call Mary" (20).

authentic reflections of the human condition. In "Bartleby" the narrator speculates on the effect of "continually handling those dead letters (which arrive) by the cartload." One is struck by the emphasis on time and mass, by the spiritual consequences he intuitively feels of exposure to the timeless repetition of these symbols of human futility. How long would anyone faced with such evidence maintain a faith in a teleological universe? Moreover, this weight is carried by "a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness" (41). William James has categorized such individuals as "sick souls," those who are "persuaded that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world's meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart" (131)<sup>12</sup>. And, indeed, what would one expect of those whose life in the world was the "unpleasant task of hearing what the sick souls...have to say of the secrets of their prison-house, their own peculiar form of consciousness"? (James, 135) This vision or consciousness of chaos and disorder, and consequent recognition of the vulnerability of life lies at the core of the visionary's nature. But how is one to be in the face of such a vision? How does one respond to having been condemned to such freedom?

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<sup>12</sup>In "Some Notes on Miss L" set down shortly after the publication of the book, West noted his indebtedness to James' book: "Miss Lonelyhearts became a portrait of a priest of our time who has a religious experience. His case is classical and is built on all the cases in James' Varieties of Religious Experience and Starbuck's Psychology of Religion. The psychology is theirs, not mine. The imagery is mine" (Wisker, 158). For discussions of James' influence on West, see Schoenewolf and Lorich.

Not surprisingly, the desire for escape from the anxiety and despair inherent in ontological choice is tenacious; the illusion of comfort and assurance offered by the rhythms of quotidian life, narcotic. Miss Lonelyhearts develops "an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone" (10). In the throes of a fever, he envisions himself in a pawnshop where he forms figures from the "paraphernalia of suffering": phalluses, hearts, diamonds, circles, triangles, squares, swastikas. "But nothing proved definitive and he began to make a gigantic cross" (30-1). He recalls a transcendent moment from his childhood when, as he played a Mozart piece, his sister spontaneously danced. As he reflects on the memory, he envisions all children, everywhere, dancing: "square replacing oblong and being replaced by circle" (15) in a formal ritual of innocence and order. When his frenzied attempts to establish a geometrical order inevitably break down, he seeks out Betty, who, in straightening his tie, gave Miss Lonelyhearts the sense that "she straightened much more. And he had once thought that if her world were larger, were the world, she might order it as finely as the objects on her dressing table."

The deep spiritual wounds Miss Lonelyhearts suffers through his column are diagnosed by Betty as "city troubles," to be ministered to by removal to the country. Betty is West's personification of James' conception of the healthy-minded individual, those who "take good as the essential and universal aspect of being (and) deliberately exclude evil from (the) field of vision" (88). But Betty's (and Miss Lonelyhearts') character is considerably more complex than an element in a Manichean abstraction between the forces of light and darkness. Her goal is to be happy, but it is a happiness compounded of bringing happiness to others (specifically Miss Lonelyhearts' febrile existence) and maintaining a sense of order in everyday life<sup>13</sup>.

James notes that we should all ideally know someone "whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions" (80). This is realized in Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty's return to a pastoral and more primitive setting, a motif seen repeatedly in visionary literature. Predictably, Betty's ministrations are to Miss Lonelyhearts' body, not his spirit. He realizes that the physical manifestations of his illness were "merely

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<sup>13</sup>The distinction between Miss Lonelyhearts' and Betty's ways of being may be understood in the book's climactic scene. He rushes to embrace Doyle; she arrives to nurse Miss Lonelyhearts. The boundaries of Betty's existence--of her consciousness--simply do not include the Peter Doyles of the world. Of course, the most telling aspect of the scene is the abject, darkly ironic failure of both their efforts to effect happiness.

a trick by his body to relieve one more profound." Betty's course of treatment is one of perpetual denial: "Whenever he mentioned the letters or Christ, she changed the subject to tell long stories about life on the farm. She seemed to think that if he never talked about these things, his body would get well" (36).

But facing Betty, he comes to "self-consciousness"; that is, he realizes the futility of escaping from despair through something as facile as changing one's environment<sup>14</sup>, that his condition requires something decidedly more radical, interior and encompassing. Indeed his despair has become precious to him, a sign of his emerging selfhood. As they return to the city, and he realizes Betty's "cure" hasn't altered his vision, "he felt better...because he had begun to think himself a faker and a fool" (38). His reaction is an object lesson in existential authenticity, a lesson the narrator of "The Brink of Darkness" fails to learn in his removal to Colorado, but one Bartleby implicitly masters in his final words: "I know where I am."

The opposition between the visionary and the mundane mind--between the sick soul and the healthy-minded--is one defined by borders. "(Betty's) world was not the world and

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<sup>14</sup>One is inevitably reminded of Satan's "Myself am Hell." William James terms such remedies as Betty's and Miss Lonelyhearts' pastoral idyll "reliefs, momentary escapes from evil" and distinguishes them from true religious happiness, which is contingent upon the individual's very immersion in the destructive element he had so desperately sought to avoid.

could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not" (11). Miss Lonelyhearts' perspective encompasses the most ragged edges of his world while Betty possesses the "power" (suggesting, perhaps, a kind of trick or learned response, like "keeping one's balance") to exclude that which is disconcerting to or challenging of her "sureness." As James points out, "happiness, like every other emotional state, has blindness and insensibility to opposing facts given it as its instinctive weapon for self-protection against disturbance" (88). Not surprisingly, visionaries--with the ethical friction they generate through their disenchantment with everyday life--are labeled as at best unreasonable, at worst perverse, if not downright mad.

Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike, by using their education and glibness to satirize the correspondents' pleas for help and guidance, utilize language as an escape, intellectualizing their responses and maintaining an aesthetic distance from--a blindness to--the human suffering that simultaneously surrounds and inhabits them. Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts recalls, had taught him "to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words" (33); that is, he taught him to use the infinite play of language to deconstruct the reality Miss Lonelyhearts perceived and live in bad faith: "Shrike had...made a sane view of this Christ business impossible"

(8). Thus does his "Christ dream" become perverted into its antithesis--a source of mockery and contempt for those who seek succor. But as with Bartleby, Miss Lonelyhearts' daily practice of reading ("He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike....") teaches him to read/see in a new way; the psychic torque produced by the sheer weight of the emotional pain he confronts through the letters ultimately lays waste to every intellectual defense he can muster to distance himself from that pain.

Ironically, then, where Shrike cynically labels art as "a way out," an escape from despair, art functions in the form of the letters as an immersion into despair, which, to double the irony, is a way, perhaps the only way, out of despair. An explanation is in order. First, in what sense are the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives "art"? Setting aside for the moment the obvious points that they are narrative in form as well as components of an artistic object, let us consider the implications of Shrike's "theory" of art. Shrike, who plays tempter to Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ-figure, catalogues for his antagonist the possible avenues of escape from a life which has become, Shrike correctly analyzes, "a desert empty of comfort." Shrike is a brilliant polemicist and a consummate

nihilist<sup>15</sup>. He cites--indeed, explores, in many cases--nature, primitivism, hedonism, drugs, and suicide as "escapes" from the existential dread that is devouring Miss Lonelyhearts' soul. He groups art among these which, with his acerbic wit, he outlines for his nemesis:

Tell them that you know your shoes are broken and that there are pimples on your face, yes, and that you have buck teeth and a club foot, but that you don't care, for to-morrow they are playing Beethoven's last quartets in Carnegie Hall and at home you have Shakespeare's plays in one volume.  
(34-5)

Shrike is mocking aesthetics here ("When you are cold, warm yourself before the flaming tints of Titian...") and the idea that the object of beauty can somehow sustain the individual--physically or spiritually--allowing one to escape quotidian necessity on the one hand, while supplying spiritual sustenance on the other. But Shrike's conception of art is a conventionally narrow one both in his citation of examples and, more importantly, in his implicit assumption that art can, should or aims to allow the individual to transcend the quotidian rather than to live meaningfully within it.

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<sup>15</sup>Harold Bloom connects Shrike's character to Jewish Gnosticism, particularly the work of Gershom Scholem, whose essay, "Redemption Through Sin" in The Messianic Idea in Judaism Bloom considers to be "the best commentary I know on Miss Lonelyhearts." According to Scholem, the nihilistic philosophy means "to free oneself of all laws, conventions, and religions, to adapt every conceivable attitude and reject it, and to follow one's leader step for step into the abyss" (Bloom, 7). This distinctly defines what Shrike is about in his systematic rejection of escapes or "ways of being." Just as clearly, Shrike acts as a moral counterpoint to Miss Lonelyhearts' idealization of Christ; thus Shrike's implicit "leader" may be said to inhabit the most abysmal of abysses.

An existentialist thinker like Kierkegaard offers a much more encompassing idea in Fear and Trembling, a meditation on faith, which is discussed through the lens of the narrative of Abraham's consenting to sacrifice his son Isaac. Now Miss Lonelyhearts has a problem with faith: "If he could only believe in Christ, then adultery would be a sin, then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer" (26). Moreover, his reading of Dostoyevsky<sup>16</sup> has taught him the corollary to his doubt--"All is permitted,"--and it is precisely this vision of chaos that gnaws incessantly at his soul. Yet it is with a contradiction worthy of Kierkegaard that Miss Lonelyhearts' faith is created. In Fear and Trembling Kierkegaard seeks to have his reader empathize with Abraham as the "father of faith" confronts the horror of God's command. This empathy is essential in Kierkegaard's view lest we trivialize the quotidian, chronological, and existential element of Abraham's experience through conveniently labeling it a "test" or "trial":

One mounts a winged horse, that very instant one is on the mountain in Moriah, the same instant one sees the ram. One forgets that Abraham rode on an ass, which can keep up no more than a leisurely pace, that he had a three day journey, that he needed time to chop the firewood, bind Isaac, and sharpen the knife. (80)

The situation Kierkegaard outlines here is analogous to Miss Lonelyhearts' originally thinking of the letters as "jokes." The more letters he reads and the more he immerses

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<sup>16</sup>See page 118.

himself in their details, the more profound is his anguish before his realization that they represent an instance of significant form having been given to the quotidian and existential reality of his correspondents' lives; the letters possess--demonstrably in Miss Lonelyhearts' case--the power to change one's perception, to make visible what had been repressed or lost to the habitual. In this these narratives surely attain the status of art. But most remarkably, it is these letters themselves which create Miss Lonelyhearts' faith. Shrike asks:

"Come tell us, brother, how it was that you first came to believe. Was it music in a church, or the death of a loved one, or, mayhap, some wise old priest....Ah, how stupid of me," Shrike continued. "It was the letters, of course. Did I myself not say that the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America?" (44)

In the same manner, the suffering of the visionary is capable of creating faith in others. It is the narrator who, under the influence of Bartleby's despair, perceives the possibility and implications of that despair. In other words, Bartleby, in the course of the events of the story, has taught him (and perhaps the reader) to see in this new way, to shift the weight of his world view from the camp of the "healthy-minded" to that of the "sick souls"<sup>17</sup>. Thus the narrator's

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<sup>17</sup>Exactly the same point is made at the conclusion of Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and "Heart of Darkness." In "SS" Leggatt fosters the nameless captain's realization of his selfhood and then, in true existential fashion, embarks "a free man" on a "new destiny;" that is, he strikes out to go beyond his own self, to exist in a continual state of becoming. In "HD" Marlow conducts the nameless frame

concluding, seemingly melodramatic "Ah, Bartleby! Ah humanity!" when viewed through the visionary lens is seen to in fact signal his perception of Bartleby's experience as emblematic of the condition of humanity--the figure (Bartleby) is understood to be organically connected to and intrinsically part of the ground (humanity) from which he so eloquently projects.

It is not surprising, then, that when Miss Lonelyhearts describes the city as a wasteland that can only be resurrected through the tears of his correspondents, he concludes "Ah, humanity..." thereby implicitly connecting himself to "Bartleby"'s narrator's perception of Bartleby as an archetype of modern visionary experience. This expression, as was the conceit of the revivifying effects of the correspondents' tears, is offered ironically if not cynically by Miss Lonelyhearts, but as a visionary well into the experience of conversion, his "joke went into a dying fall (because) he was heavy with shadow" (5). The "weight" of those shadows is part of the cluster of figure-ground imagery that informs West's novella.

Because it is a technique West strategically employs in Miss Lonelyhearts and because it stands as a cogent emblem of

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narrator's initiation. The story concludes with the narrator's observation that "the tranquil waterway...seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." He has been taught to see the existential darkness which envelopes human endeavor. This type of pedagogical strategy is inherent in visionary fictions and signals their prime value to us as readers.

visionary and existential experience<sup>18</sup>, I would like to briefly consider some of the implications of the concept of figure and ground. Etymologically, "figure" is derived from the Latin "figura" meaning "plastic form," something which is shaped or molded. Moreover, Ellman Crasnow<sup>19</sup> points out that "figura" comes from the same stem as "fingere," from whose participle "fictus" we form "fictitious" and "fiction." This clearly complicates the relationship between the concept's parts if we assume--as in Gestalt psychology--the "figure" to be the more privileged of the pair or that upon which we focus our attention as, for example, in focusing upon the words on a printed page rather than the page itself. Simply stated, if the figure-ground concept may be posited as an emblem of human experience with its "figure" the life the individual shapes in the world among others and its "ground" his or her underlying and often unexamined values, ideology, and world view, what are the existential implications of the figure's no longer being privileged? Moreover, if meaning is taken as immanent in the figure, how are we to consider the ground? With the

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<sup>18</sup>The aptness of figure-ground images lies in the relationship of their components; that is, that part which is designated the "figure" in effect cancels out the being of the part designated the "ground." If the designation of the components is reversed then what had been the "figure" becomes "extinguished." Thus we have an emblem for the anguish of being, which, one could argue, is the result of the anxiety of nothingness, that nothing is just as possible as being--and just as contingent on the inscrutable vagaries of the universe.

<sup>19</sup>I am indebted here to Crasnow's research on this subject as is he to Erich Auerbach's.

validity, truth or centrality of the figure called into question--and this type of questioning is central to visionary experience (hence its danger)--one must then turn to the neglected element of "ground," a source of stability or orientation, as the privileged component. "Ground" in this sense suggests a fundamental principle, that which creates the conditions upon which the figure can declare itself. Ellman offers the example of "grounds of an argument," which suggests a set of conditions which is accepted but--as with the "ground" in any figure-ground pairing--perhaps not directly or openly acknowledged. The Oxford English Dictionary further defines ground in the sense of "that on which a system, work, institution, art, or condition of things is founded" (emphasis mine). Thus when Miss Lonelyhearts speaks of "examin(ing) the values by which he lives," he is reflecting upon the "grounds" of his life--the essential tenets of his existence. The ontological implications of such an examination are profound in that one is calling into question the philosophical foundation and assumptions which support one's existence in the everyday world. What seems clear is that while the figure is dependent upon the ground for its very existence (ideally being shaped or formed upon the principles of its ground), this dependency is not mutual: the ground is the essential, primary, ur component; I would further suggest that the ground's very amorphous, opaque and enveloping nature suggests its affinity with the silence of the universe against which

human beings must seek to define themselves; that is, the grounds of visionary being lie in the visionary's knowledge of the abyss, and in the discovery that no ground exists to support or give meaning to his or her being in the universe.<sup>20</sup>

West illustrates this by having Miss Lonelyhearts' immersion into this existential consciousness imaged through three figure-ground pairings which open the novella and represent in turn the mind in relation to the text, the spirit in relation to the self, and the body in relation to the world. Each image is embedded in a text: Shrike's prayer, Miss Lonelyhearts' abortive reply to a correspondent, and the letters themselves. Indeed, the first action in which we see Miss Lonelyhearts engaged is reading: "... (he) stared at a piece of white cardboard. On it a prayer had been printed by Shrike...." The prayer is a satire of "Soul of Christ" from Saint Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises<sup>21</sup>, and the particular problem for Miss Lonelyhearts (and the reader) is to decide whether to read this text ironically or naively, whether its essential message is salvageable and still capable of saving

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<sup>20</sup>The OED's first (of six pages) definition of "ground" is "the bottom; the lowest part or downward limit of anything," which is to say that the linguistic nature of "ground" harbors the idea of the abyss.

<sup>21</sup>The reader will recall my citation in chapter two of Robert Scholes' comparison of Dubliners to Spiritual Exercises in the ability of Joyce's stories to develop the reader's "conscience, to accept the view that morality is a matter of individual responses...rather than an invocation of religious or ethical rules of thumb." Roquentin in Nausea also mentions reading Loyola's work.

or whether verbal irony is to be the last bastion of the damned. The implications of his textual analysis are therefore profound in that his mind is "searching for some clue to a sincere answer" to the panoply of human suffering which permeates his existence as the white cardboard permeates the text of Shrike's prayer. I am suggesting here that Miss Lonelyhearts "reads," perceives, becomes aware of the existential implications of "ground"--the white cardboard which surrounds the "figure" of the prayer--and understands how it reflects his condition. The cardboard is the named object of his "staring," and its valorization is further evident in the subordination of the "figure" through the prayer's placement in the passive voice. His deepening vision of the omnipresence of the abyss is, like the "unescapable" Shrike, a reality he can no longer ignore.

The second figure-ground dichotomy--of a white flame against an enveloping dark altar--suggests a reverse image of the white ground and dark figure of the first, a kind of Yang-Yin:

Although the deadline was less than a quarter of an hour away, he was still working on his leader. He had gone as far as: "Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar."

While the intended tone of this aborted response to one of his correspondents is ironic, it is nonetheless a statement of ideology, of the spiritual "grounds" Miss Lonelyhearts' has chosen for his existence: namely, that life is innately

meaningful and good. Yet as figure-ground dichotomies, both of these messages may be read as their antitheses; that is, Shrike's prayer is clearly relevant to a world emptied of its symbols and sources of spiritual refuge. Miss Lonelyhearts is, as Shrike notes, the modern guide for the perplexed. Similarly, Miss Lonelyhearts' answer simultaneously articulates the grounds of his being but belies the reality of his experience of being in the world, which would then have his answer read: "Life is meaningless, for it is full of nightmares and violence, sadism<sup>22</sup> and despair, and disbelief that envelopes all."

The final figure-ground pairing focuses on the physical reality of the suffering that is manifested in the letters, which are imaged as "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife" (1). The image intriguingly anticipates Sartre's idea of the "being-in-itself" (or simply the "in-itself"), his term for the noumenal world or that upon which the human mind has not imposed its systems of artificial order. In Nausea he images the in-itself as a shapeless, doughy mass, a malignant presence capable of engulfing us at any moment. What I have termed the "existential moment" is a prime instance of the breakdown of the phenomenal world (or what Sartre called simply "the world") of imposed order (even

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<sup>22</sup>Miss Lonelyhearts commits numerous instances of sadism in the book involving people, animals and himself: "Turning back to his desk, he picked up a bulky letter in a dirty envelope. He read it for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain" (39).

time and space would fit into this category) and the breaking through of the in-itself. This offers an interesting gloss on West's returning us to the idea of text in the final figure-ground image. The letters may be seen as "figura," things which are shaped into (significant) form from the encompassing mass of the in-itself to stand as mute testimony to human experience in a ruthless universe.

These introductory images are complemented by a series of four other figure-ground images which, in effect, adumbrate Miss Lonelyhearts' visionary progression. First, his room is described as "full of shadows." It is an ascetic's room, containing a bed, table and two chairs<sup>23</sup>. The walls, too, are bare save for "an ivory Christ that hung opposite the foot of the bed. He had removed the figure from the cross to which it had been fastened and had nailed it to the wall with large spikes" (8). Miss Lonelyhearts' deliberate, idiosyncratic nailing of the Christ figure to his blank wall, a wall which encompasses an area of shadow, emblemizes his response to his existential dilemma of discovering meaning and goodness amid desolation and despair. He knows, too, that the price of that answer is a sickness, which I take to be the metamorphosis of vision: "Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business" (3).

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. Marlow's room in Lord Jim where Jim commits to a pursuit of authentic being.

The third image of this series is couched within the alternative answer to a crucified, suffering Christ--the philosophy of healthy-mindedness--in the form of Betty's retreat to nature. The couple occupy an abandoned house owned by Betty's aunt. Working, cleaning, scouring, they bring a semblance of order to the ramshackle dwelling. However, the futility of their idyll, presented within an Edenic motif replete with apple and guilt over Betty's sexuality, is revealed as they essentially walk into the heart of darkness, the ground against which they had sought to define their spiritual well-being: "...after eating, they went for a walk in the woods. It was very sad under the trees. Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death--rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush" (38). This is the image of the macrocosm of nature, which Miss Lonelyhearts has earlier envisioned: "Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature...the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of its own destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worthwhile" (30-1). This is an existential vision which sees beyond the observable regularities of nature into its essential chaos. But even this understanding or knowledge per se is without value to the

visionary, who chooses to live, to make his ontological stand, in the everyday world. It is a battle he chooses to see--in light of his understanding of its ultimate futility--as "worthwhile."<sup>24</sup>

The final figure-ground images occur in the novella's climax, again set in Miss Lonelyhearts' room where he is consumed with fever:

He fastened his eyes on the Christ that hung on the wall opposite his bed. As he stared at it, it became a bright fly, spinning with quick grace on a background of blood velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars.

Everything else in the room was dead--chairs, table, pencils, clothes, books. He thought of this black world of things as a fish. And he was right, for it suddenly rose to the bright bait on the wall. It rose with a splash of music and he saw its shining silver belly. (56-7)

These concluding figure-ground images join the quotidian and visionary worlds. Christ, whose teachings were traditionally symbolized by a fish, here emerges from a dynamic background as a lure, which in turn attracts the objects of the "black world of things," which themselves metamorphose into the fish, rising to the divine bait. The "shining silver belly" of the fish recalls the snake's scales being imaged as "tiny mirrors" in his earlier "hysterical" vision. But where that reflection had generated only "a semblance of life (in) the dead world," this vision produces music, light, grace, and life: "(Miss

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<sup>24</sup>Camus's treatment of the Sisyphus myth offers the best gloss on this situation.

Lonelyhearts') heart was a rose and in his skull another rose bloomed. The room was full of grace:

He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one. When they became one, his identification with God was complete. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's.

God said, "Will you accept it, now?"

And he replied, "I accept, I accept." (57)

The antecedent of "it" in God's question contains an intriguing and revealing ambiguity. Textually, it could refer to either God himself as symbolized by the lure or it could suggest the everyday world as symbolized by the fish. It seems clear to me that West intended this confusion<sup>25</sup>; that, indeed, the confusion over the antecedent's being divine or secular is the point. That one can only live meaningfully in the world in a condition of faith which is an outgrowth of vision. James speaks of religion's role in helping us to face the universe: "At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Shall our protests against certain things in it be radical and unforgiving, or shall we think that, even with evil, there are ways of living that must lead to good?" (41). Discovering those "ways of living" is the essence of visionary fictions.

James is careful to differentiate between "the more commonplace happinesses" or "reliefs" which are "occasioned by

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<sup>25</sup>Comerchero points out that "apparently casual responses are far from casual. The richness of the novel resides in symbolic or archetypal dimension residing in almost every detail" (94).

our momentary escapes from evils either experienced or threatened" and true religious experience, which "cares no longer for escape (but) consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice--inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome." Clearly the former are in the nature of the "escapes" catalogued by Shrike; as Shrike concludes, "God alone is our escape."

But what does this Christ-like demeanor mean in terms of one's everyday life? Again James lays down the philosophy, which West illustrates through his art. James seeks to define the pathology of suffering through isolating the characteristic element of religious experience. His methodology is to examine religious experience in extremis in that its essence "will be most prominent and easy to notice in (those cases) which are most one-sided, exaggerated, and intense" (45)<sup>26</sup>. We experience the same strategy, of course, in the unrelieved suffering of Miss Lonelyhearts' correspondents. James further focuses on religious essence through comparing and contrasting "the mind of an abstractly conceived Christian with that of a moralist similarly conceived." The moralist, James argues, may live a life "manly, stoical, moral or philosophical...in proportion as it is less swayed by paltry personal considerations and more by objective ends that call for energy, even though that energy bring personal loss and pain." Such a man is a "high-hearted

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. Jasper's concept of the "limit situation."

freeman and no pining slave. And yet he lacks something which the Christian par excellence, the mystic and ascetic saint, for example, has in abundant measure, and which makes of him a human being of an altogether different denomination" (emphasis mine). Agreeing that both the moralist and the Christian "spurn the pinched and mumping sick-room attitude," (that is, that they maintain a militant stance in facing the silence of the universe), James sees this differentia of religion as constituted of two ineffable factors: first, the replacement of the moralist's "volition" with a "higher kind of emotion" by the Christian; and second, a "state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday" (45-47, emphases mine). This correlates almost exactly with Kierkegaard's belief that despair can only be surmounted through experiencing despair.

West illustrates this distinction in two scenes between Miss Lonelyhearts and the abject cripple, Peter Doyle<sup>27</sup>. The first is their initial meeting. Mrs. Doyle, with whom Miss

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<sup>27</sup>Harold Bloom has pointed out that West took the name Peter Doyle from Whitman's pathetic Civil War friend. Whitman, of course, stands at the opposite end of the psychological spectrum from West's dark nihilism.

Lonelyhearts has committed adultery, has sent her husband to invite the columnist to dinner. They meet in a bar and are at first joined by Shrike. Doyle's entering hobble is accompanied by "many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect." As Shrike spots Doyle, he winks at Miss Lonelyhearts and raises a toast to "humanity." Again, when Doyle attempts a bawdy innuendo about his job as a meter reader, Shrike replies, " You can know nothing about humanity; you are humanity," and leaves the two alone. Seated at a table, Miss Lonelyhearts studies Doyle's "strange face," which fails to balance, looking "like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests." West is clearly utilizing the rhetoric of exaggeration here: Everyman as insect, cuckold, cripple. The two stare wordlessly at each other, a process "that began to excite them both." Finally Doyle labors into speech, but his words are unintelligible to Miss Lonelyhearts; in fact, they are pure poetry, a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion in which he "giv(es) birth to groups of words that lived inside of him as things, a jumble of the retorts he had meant to make when insulted and the private curses against fate that experience had taught him to swallow." Doyle's language is accompanied by the "pictorial" play of his hands, which, like a primordial dumbshow, desperately attempt to interpret the ecstasy of his emotion.

Before this outpouring, Miss Lonelyhearts is described "like a priest, (who) turned his face slightly away." This is only one of numerous "confessions" which Miss Lonelyhearts hears. In addition to his correspondents, virtually every character, including Shrike, confesses him or herself to him. One of the most significant instances is the confession of Shrike's wife, Mary, with whom Miss Lonelyhearts also carries on an adulterous affair. Over drinks, she relates her mother's death from cancer and her father's cruelty to his wife. "He was," she recalls, "a portrait painter, a man of genius...." This triggers in Miss Lonelyhearts' mind an understanding of the human need for transcendence through narrative:

Parents are also part of the business of dreams. My father was a Russian prince, my father was a Piute Indian chief, my father was an Australian sheep baron, my father lost all his money in Wall Street, my father was a portrait painter. People like Mary were unable to do without such tales. They told them because they wanted to talk about something besides clothing or business or the movies, because they wanted to talk about something poetic.  
(23)

Such confessions are the oral counterparts of the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives and as such demonstrate the narrative nature of those letters, of the human need to first, tell one's story--to articulate one's presence against the silence of the universe--and, second, of the power of narratives to effect transcendence, to allow an individual to go beyond her or himself, to create alternative and, ultimately, authentic

lives<sup>28</sup>. Significantly, when Doyle grows more (conventionally) articulate in his first meeting with Miss Lonelyhearts, he does not tell his story but rather produces a narrative, a letter, which he "forces" upon him. Doyle's letter is, in essence, a philosophical document, an examination of his life prompted by an existential crisis: "I have never let myself get blue until lately when I have been feeling lousy all the time on account of not getting anywhere and asking myself what is it all for." Doyle's "blueness," his crisis of despair, corresponds to Miss Lonelyhearts' condition characterized above by Shrike as "feeling like hell." Seven times in the course of his letter, Doyle redefines and reiterates his primal question, as if its very starkness was insufficient to bear its gravity.

Doyle's faith in Miss Lonelyhearts as a spiritual confessor cum guide is based on two factors: first, the latter's reply to "Disillusioned," whose pseudonym might stand as an eponymous antecedent to the entire process of vision; second, Miss Lonelyhearts' experience as a reader: "I figured maybe you no something about it because you have read a lot of books...." Again, the antecedent of "it" in Doyle's sentence is the question, "What is it (life) all for?" As I suggested

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<sup>28</sup>In Survival in Auschwitz Primo Levi speaks of how the need for survivors "to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs" (5-6).

in my first chapter, such questions leave all of us, for a variety of reasons, uncomfortable. Radically subjective, darkly opaque and eternally elusive, they lie like beached whales threatening to befoul our happy outings to the seashore because, once posed, they are impossible to ignore. Indeed, West took a tremendous artistic risk in placing such a stark question explicitly at the thematic center of his work, but he adroitly implies the kernel of an answer in the question itself through Doyle's persistent conflation of the existential "no" with "knowing"<sup>29</sup>. Doyle has implicit faith in reading as the vehicle which can teach one to reply to the "Everlasting No" which dogs his days.

Miss Lonelyhearts' evolution as reader of both literary and social texts describes a curious antithesis to the increasing levels of sophistication and intellectualization that might be assumed of a trained literary critic. One could even argue the professional critic becomes increasingly removed from the text as a living document--which is to say as a document which can help us to live on a visionary/existential level--the more she becomes immersed in the professional concerns of that text, concerns which will, presumably, facilitate living on a quotidian plane<sup>30</sup>. Initially

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<sup>29</sup>One might well recall the encyclopedic knowledge of the whale displayed in Melville's cytology chapters in Moby Dick. That great existential symbol, when rendered, was reduced to nothing.

<sup>30</sup>Implicit here is that the intellectual journey of professional readers begins in the joy of the discovery of

these are Miss Lonelyhearts' stated concerns, too: job and advancement. He begins, it might be said, in sophistication, originally seeing the letters (and their implications) as "jokes" to be criticized/responded to in a tone of condescension. But through the very naivete of their reading of Miss Lonelyhearts' facile replies, his correspondents teach him to appreciate the latent possibilities for being inherent in his own satire; their credulity and commitment as readers--they "take (his responses) seriously"--infuse him with the courage to live what he writes, to, as the aphorism to this study suggests, drink from his own well.

It is instructive, then, that the reading of Miss Lonelyhearts we are made privy to beyond his correspondents' letters is The Brothers Karamazov; indeed, one of the characters refers to him as "Dostoyevski," and mockingly urges him to stop "pulling the Russian by recommending suicide" (25-6). Dostoyevski's major works are, of course, "riddled" with the themes and questions of visionary literature, and both Dostoyevski and Tolstoy were major influences on West. But no single work more fully captures the existential dilemma of facing the universe's silence than does The Brothers Karamazov. Specifically, West quotes from the lectures of Father Zossima, a Christlike monk who mentors Alyosha, the novel's spiritual center. Zossima speaks of the power of an

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meaning in texts. As a graduate school colleague once observed to me, "I stop (work) every once in a while to remind myself that I used to like this stuff."

all-encompassing love which will reveal "the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day." For him, seeing is understanding, but that vision is contingent upon universal, non-judgmental love, even of man "in his sin" (8) or of man in his decrepitude. Thus as the redemption of Coleridge's Mariner is contingent on his learning to love (learning to see in a new way) the water snakes he loathed, so too, does Miss Lonelyhearts first jerk his hand away when he feels Doyle's "damp hand accidentally touch his under the table....but he "drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing (Doyle's) letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage." Clearly this is the "volitional" love of James' moralist, that in which the individual must "hold his breath and keep his muscles tense...before the diseased conditions of the body" (46).

But Miss Lonelyhearts' final encounter with Doyle is infused with "the excitement of a higher kind of emotion," which for James denotes the authentic religious experience<sup>31</sup>. Miss Lonelyhearts awakens from a fever during which he has a Christ vision to hear his door bell. It is Doyle, ascending the stairs with a gun wrapped symbolically in newspaper, bent on avenging his cuckolding. James speaks of the religious feeling imbuing one with "a new sphere of power. When the

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<sup>31</sup>West entitles the chapter of this encounter "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience."

outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste" (48). Thus does Miss Lonelyhearts, with his quotidian world in shambles, interpret Doyle's presence as a "sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole" (57). He rushes toward Doyle "with his arms spread for the miracle." This is a state of authentic "religious happiness" in which escape is neither an option nor a desire:

In its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer for escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice--inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome. (49)

Ironically, in the rapture of his religious ecstasy, Miss Lonelyhearts again does not understand Doyle when the latter shouts out a warning. Doyle fires and the two, entwined, tumble down the stairs in a slapstick burlesque of sacrifice, love, and redemption.

Given the ludicrousness of the novella's ending, West's attitude toward religious experience as a means of personal salvation would seem problematical. Thomas Lorch argues, correctly I feel, that both James and West accepted the death of God. Indeed, James, quoting Professor Leuba, contends that gods have always been a construct of the (subconscious) human mind, conceived to fill a human need:

God is not known, he is not understood; he is used--sometimes as a meat-purveyor, sometimes as a moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves useful, the religious

consciousness asks for no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions.

It is with this utility of the conception of God that I believe West is concerned. As a visionary, Miss Lonelyhearts requires a framework within which he can give meaning to what he has seen. Religion, specifically the idea of Christ, is a receptacle for his expression of faith, and faith, as is existentialism itself, is an attitude, a way of facing the universe. What is essential in visionary terms about this story is not that Miss Lonelyhearts' end can be viewed as an instance of psychosis or that his small corner of the world is decidedly more miserable at his death than when he first stared at Shrike's satiric prayer. Rather it is that Miss Lonelyhearts confronts his dark vision of existence, constructs an attitude of faith in relation to it, and lives up to that vision, which is to say that he becomes himself. Where his eyes had been closed in his boyhood reveries of Christ, both they and his arms are now open in his death. He lives what he knows to be true.

There is a striking irony in the theme of authenticity's presence in Miss Lonelyhearts. West was born a Jew; his given name, Nathan Weinstein. But his Jewishness was an aspect of himself that he abhorred, and he, in effect, became a Jewish anti-Semite throughout his life<sup>32</sup>. There is but a single

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<sup>32</sup>Bloom notes West's propensity for referring to Jewish women as "bagels"; he apparently assiduously avoided dating

reference to Judaism in Miss Lonelyhearts. During his country retreat with Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts goes to a store for supplies and mentions to the clerk that he and Betty have observed a deer: "The man said that there was still plenty of deer at the pond because no yids ever went there. He said it wasn't the hunters who drove out the deer, but the yids" (38). It is a curious reference. Certainly its racism may be viewed as part of the panorama of human degradation that informs the work,<sup>33</sup> and it fits, too, as the human counterpart of the natural corruption Miss Lonelyhearts sees as inherent even in the seemingly pristine countryside. But most potently it suggests to me the idea posited in chapter one of the visionary as Jew, the archetypal outsider who, in naming our condition and maintaining fidelity to the self, defines his or her status as outsider.

In Irwin Shaw's "Act of Faith," Seeger (read "Seer/Seeker"), the story's visionary protagonist, must also grapple with his Jewish heritage, which is to say his identity, a struggle which is presented in terms of visionary awakening<sup>34</sup>. As veterans of some of the fiercest fighting

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Jewish women.

<sup>33</sup>In one of the most offensive passages in the novella, a group of Miss Lonelyhearts' colleagues discuss the gang rapes of women reporters in retaliation for their going "literary" and attempting to further their careers. One of the incidents concludes, "On the last day they sold tickets to niggers..." (14).

<sup>34</sup>Shaw's fiction, while certainly competent, doesn't approach the complexity or depth of West's although his

following the Normandy invasion, Seeger and his two comrades, Welch and Olson, are "like brothers," and now face the problem of entertaining themselves as they await rotation home following the Allied victory. They have passes for Paris but, due to logistical problems, no money. Their one option is for Seeger to sell a German luger he seized after killing its owner, an SS major.

This external conflict takes up nearly half the story and is part of Shaw's narrative strategy to prepare the reader, through creating certain narrative expectations, to share vicariously in Seeger's existential moment and interior

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literary output far surpasses West's. Shaw has written 12 novels, 10 plays, three works of non-fiction and countless short stories. Readers may well be familiar with dramatized versions of his novels Beggarmen, Thief and Rich Man, Poor Man, which attained considerable popularity when televised. Shaw's reputation lies firmly, I believe, in his achievement in the short story. "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," "The Eighty Yard Run," and "Main Currents of American Thought," among others, are frequently anthologized. Critical reaction to Shaw's work has tended toward charges of its being superficial. Leslie Fiedler termed it a "half-art," a view which Giles contends became widely accepted in academic circles. Perhaps the most telling comment on Shaw's critical reputation is to be gleaned from the dust jacket of the Modern Library edition of his selected stories. The quote is from Lionel Trilling:

He always does observe and always does feel, and even when he is facile in observation and sentiment he is not insincere.... He has established himself in a position which guarantees at least the sociological or cultural interests of whatever he writes.

While Giles cites this same passage as proof of Shaw's being taken seriously by serious critics, it seems to me faint praise indeed. I have been able to find no exegesis at all on "Act of Faith."

conflict, which are presented through the agency of his father's chilling letter. This strategy of misdirection is also extended to Shaw's limited treatment of his secondary characters, each of whom is seen in terms of appearance and reality. Olson, for example, is "just the type who is killed off early and predictably and sadly in motion pictures about the war, but he had gone through four campaigns and six major battles without a scratch" (195); the captain from whom Seeger attempts to borrow money had been "a natural soldier, tireless, fanatic about detail, aggressive, severely anxious to kill Germans. But in the past few months Seeger had seen him relapsing gradually and pleasantly into a small-town wholesale hardware merchant, which he had been before the war..." (196); similarly, Welch is described with a "belligerent stance, (and a) harsh stare through the steel-rimmed GI glasses, which had nothing to do with the way Welch really was" (199).

Seeger, however, who had been wounded and returned to his unit "unchanged," lacks this surface ambiguity. He is described as "cheerful and dependable." His professionalism as a soldier is emphasized: "(He) had broken in five or six second lieutenants who had been killed or wounded..." (195). Nothing, one might gather from these few details, can alter Seeger's comfortable sense of self. But that identity is projected against a topographical and historical background that further suggests the Satrean "in-itself," the destructive

element which is always capable of poking through the thin veneer of meaning and order human beings impose. In "Act of Faith" the setting of the camp is a "bleak, wasted land" engulfed in a sea of primordial mud. Fittingly, the primitiveness of this setting is placed within the historical context of the Nazi holocaust.

The implications of Seeger's Jewishness in general and of the holocaust in particular are issues, prior to his existential moment, remote from Seeger's consciousness and sense of self. He was not like the Jews "whose every waking moment is ridden by the knowledge of Jewishness, who see signs against the Jews in every smile on a streetcar....People of all kinds had seemed to like him all his life, in the army and out." Even the horror of the Holocaust seemed psychologically and ontologically distant:

In America, especially, what was going on in Europe had seemed remote, unreal, unrelated to him. The chanting, bearded old men burning in the Nazi furnaces, and the dark-eyed women screaming prayers in Polish and Russian and German as they were pushed naked into the gas chambers had seemed as shadows and almost as unrelated to him as he trotted out onto the Stadium field for a football game, as they must have been to the men named O'Dwyer and Wickersham and Poole who played in the line beside him.

The remote "shadows" of the Nazi's victims are part of an image motif based upon Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," which traces Seeger's visionary awakening<sup>35</sup>. The story opens with

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<sup>35</sup>This motif will be seen again in chapter four's discussion of The Voyage Out.

Olson's plea to "present (their request for money) in a pitiful light" and the bulk of its actions occur in tents, simulcra of Plato's cave<sup>36</sup>. When Seeger returns to his own tent, Welch is waiting, prisoner-like, peering "short-sightedly" out at the rain. It is here that the story and Seeger's existence turns. Olson has picked up a letter for Seeger, who "goes toward the tent opening to read the letter in the light." Like Plato's freed prisoner, he is about to experience a second type of knowledge, one which transcends the boundaries of an everyday sense of the order of things.

The letter from Seeger's father is a remarkable document. Like those received by Miss Lonelyhearts, it is a plea for help and guidance, based, as was Peter Doyle's letter, upon the writer's perception of his correspondent's wider realm of experience. Seeger senses something wrong merely from the envelope's ragged handwriting, "so different from his father's usual steady, handsome, professorial script"<sup>37</sup>. "Blink(ing) his eyes," Seeger moves toward the entrance of the tent, "in the wan rainy light." The letter tells Seeger of the plight of his brother Jacob, who ostensibly had been discharged from the service due to a leg wound. The father now realizes something much more profound is amiss, that Jacob is suffering from

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<sup>36</sup>The captain's tent is illuminated by a single "gloomy light" (198).

<sup>37</sup>The fact that Seeger's father is a university professor serves with the largely semi-literate letters seen in Miss Lonelyhearts to create a certain comprehensiveness of human need for the direction visionary experience can offer.

combat fatigue and "is subject to fits of depression and hallucinations." Socrates taught that the experience of reality is only possible through escaping the cave, that if the prisoner approached the fire (or even more radically, the sun), he would perceive things in a different way, experience a brand of knowledge distinct from that revealed through the senses. What the father labels "hallucinations" are, in fact, a vision of reality in the same way as is Seeger's reference to the holocaust victims as "shadowy." Jacob has approached the fire. The father tells of coming upon Jacob crouched in their Ohio living room, peering watchfully through a window for the mobs who will be "coming for the Jews" and of his propensity for devour(ing) all the concentration camp reports, an activity which frequently leaves him in tears.

The effect of Jacob's behavior on his father reflects the effects of the father's letter on Seeger:

The terrible thing is, Norman, that I find myself coming to believe that it is not neurotic for a Jew to behave like this today. Perhaps Jacob is the normal one, and I, going about my business, teaching economics in a quiet classroom, pretending to understand that the world is comprehensible and orderly, am really the mad one....But it is crowding me, too. I do not see rockets and bombs, but I see other things. (204)

What Seeger's father "sees" is the universality of anti-Semitism, memories of outrageous anti-Semitic incidents, and his chilling ostracism by men he had thought his friends. His observation as to whether he or Jacob is "normal" is, in light of the fact of the holocaust, understatement. Robert Nozick

speaks of the holocaust as "a massive cataclysm that distorts everything around it:

Physicists sometimes speak of gravitational masses as twistings and distortions of the even geometry of the surrounding physical space; the greater the mass, the larger the distortion. The holocaust is a massive and continuing distortion of the human space...its vortices and gnarled twistings will extend very far. (242)

Jacob's "hallucinations" and Seeger's "shadows" are the result of that massive displacement. While Seeger's father can see these forces, he lacks the visionary's will to act upon them. He reveals his reluctance to espouse liberal writers or actions in his classes and his dis-ease over seeing Jewish names signed in protest of abuses: "Somehow, even in a country where my family has lived a hundred years, the enemy has won this subtle victory over me--he has made me disenfranchise myself from honest causes...." His solace is to discover Jewish names in the casualty lists, a list which once listed the death of a third son. This is a matter of authenticity. The father lacks it in that he allows his actions to be defined by the external pressures of what he perceives to be public sentiment. It is a flight from freedom. Thus in the conclusion of his letter does he turn to his visionary son: "I need some help....Maybe you understand things that I don't understand. Maybe you see some hope somewhere. Help me."

The course of Seeger's reading of the letter is punctuated by his blinking his eyes and now, at its end, he cannot see because "his eyes (were) full and dark." It is his

existential moment; he looks out over a "bleak, wasted land." His reaction parallels the anger Miss Lonelyhearts had exhibited toward the weak and suffering as well as West's protagonist's examination of values:

Now, he thought, now I have to think about it. He felt a slight, unreasonable twinge of anger at his father for presenting him with the necessity of thinking about it. The army was good about serious problems. While you were fighting, you were too busy and frightened and weary to think about anything, and at other times you were relaxing, putting your brain on a shelf, postponing everything to that impossible time of clarity and beauty after the war. Well, now, here was the impossible, clear, beautiful time, and here was his father, demanding that he think. (206-07)<sup>38</sup>

In his reflections Seeger recalls numerous instances of his being stopped by the civilians in towns liberated by the Allies and asked, "Are you a Jew?" The repeated question confuses him since "they never demanded anything from him." When it is asked again by a "little bent old man and a small, shapeless women," they are transformed, smiling "like children," at his reply.

"Look," the old man had said to his wife. "A young American soldier. A Jew. And so large and strong." He touched Seeger's arm reverently with the tips of his fingers, then had touched the Garand he was carrying. "And such a beautiful rifle..." (207-08).

Seeger, who was "not particularly sensitive," here receives "an inkling" of the significance of the inquiry. He was "a symbol of continuing life...blood of their blood, but not in

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<sup>38</sup>Marlow voices the same sentiment regarding the relationship between work and reflection in "Heart of Darkness."

hiding, not quivering in fear and helplessness, but striding secure and victorious down the street, armed and capable of inflicting terrible destruction on his enemies."

But the elderly couple's vision of Seeger as an agent of messianic vengeance fails to perceive his deep desire to deny that role and to instead live easily in the quotidian mode. His memories of personal affronts suffered and of the myriad stories of the indignities suffered by other Jews had been truths he had "made an almost conscious effort to forget....Now, holding his father's letter in his hand, he remembered them all" (210). That text serves to illuminate the darkness that has, unacknowledged, enveloped Seeger's existence; he "stares unseeingly," as might be expected of one so recently emerged from the cave, contemplating Camus' philosophical imperative: "Maybe it would've been better to have been killed in the war, like Leonard. Simpler....Leonard would not have to collect these hideous, fascinating little stories that made of every Jew a stranger in any town, on any field, on the face of the earth."

The nearly overwhelming alienation, fear, and despair that Seeger feels at this point parallels that felt by Miss Lonelyhearts faced with his letters. Both experience their existential moment--the vision of a chaotic, ruthless and indifferent universe--through these encounters with epistolary texts. And both, in response, make an act of faith; that is, in the face of all rational evidence that would suggest the

futility of human action, they choose an authentic existence based on reflection and vision which carries them beyond themselves toward recognition of and commitment to others. Seeger responds with ridicule and shame to his suicidal thoughts: "At the age of twenty-one, death was not an answer" (210)<sup>39</sup>. Standing in an open field, Seeger is approached by his two comrades, who, sensing his despondency, have come to offer their support of whatever Seeger's decision regarding the lugar might be. The three walk "aimlessly" further away from the camp/cave as Seeger silently recalls incidents in which Olson and Welch had saved him from imminent death in combat. Spontaneously, he asks what they "think of the Jews." Their ironic response--"What are Jews?"--is partly based on their intuitive sense of the contents of the letter Seeger still holds in his hand, but it also, in the context of visionary literature, asks a larger question about identity and purpose.

Plato's allegory posits a distinction between what the mind perceives and the true nature of the universe. As Socrates argues the case, true knowledge of the order of things is possible only for those who escape the cave. If that cave is a metaphor for the human mind, his question asks how it is possible to know anything beyond our minds. How do we transcend the borders of our own subjectivity? As with other fields of inquiry which posit "second worlds" (supernatural religious hierarchies and the study of particle physics come

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<sup>39</sup>Cf. Jim's identical response in chapter five.

immediately to mind), Plato is suggesting the limitations to and of the "truths" available to the quotidian or pragmatic mind.

But for the existential or visionary mind, the only knowledge of value is the understanding of the human condition, by which is meant the contingency and meaninglessness of human existence: we do not know why we are nor can we hope to attain that knowledge. While the limitations the pragmatic mind chooses to place upon itself define Kierkegaard's despair that does not know it is despair and a flight from freedom, the visionary is immersed in the anguish and passion of freedom and the imperative of choosing how to be, which an understanding of the human condition entails. The individual can only become himself and transcend the nothingness of his predicament by perceiving and embracing the essential emptiness of his state.

In "Act of Faith" the tension between these competing visions of reality is presented in the form of narratives about Jews and their respective quotidian and visionary analyses. On the one hand is the pragmatic equation of the Jew with chaos and evil. Utilized as a scapegoat figure, the Jew ironically supplies a causal, "rational" relationship to the malevolence of the human landscape. Thus does Seeger recall blatant acts of anti-Semitism occurring in moments of the direst physical danger ("In the fogs and the cold, swelling Arctic seas off the Aleutians, on a small boat, subject to

sudden, mortal attack at any moment....") or in complete contradistinction to facts (On the day of FDR's death, someone yelling, "Finally, they got the Jew out of the White House.") On the other hand, Jews themselves collect these same narratives "Like a special, lunatic kind of miser," (209) as if, instinctively, they perceive the very facticity of the confusion, ignorance, and irrationality the stories represent to be essential components of reality, of the human condition. In effect, they make the destructive element those narratives represent hold them up.

Always the key is how one chooses to be in the face of the existential vision. Seeger confronts a choice between violence toward and faith in other human beings. Originally the lugar had represented a "vague, half-understood sign to himself that justice had once been done and that he had been its instrument" (208). Existentialist thinkers often speak of such a precognitive state in which the individual already intuitively knows what is not fully revealed until one is deeply involved in the experience of anguish. Where Seeger had originally intended to return to America with the weapon's barrel plugged, now in the light of his father's narrative, in the full passion of his anguish and vision, he perceives the necessity of returning with it loaded. His sole option, the one he chooses, is to rely on his comrades<sup>40</sup> in the crucible

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<sup>40</sup>The various states from which Olson, Welch, and Seeger hail are mentioned, implying, I think, their universality. As with Miss Lonelyhearts' spiritual faith, the wisdom and

of everyday life as he had in warfare. In the totality of his vision of the malevolence of humankind, this is profoundly an act of faith.

Like existentialism itself, faith projects an attitude, a way of being, which is constitutive of the entire person. In Abbagnano's analysis, faith reflects not just an intellectual act or a sentiment or a practical activity because it is all these activities, "a fundamental mode of being in which all man's expressions can take root and from which all can deduce their own specific significance" (61). As the figure is inseparable from the ground from which it projects, faith can only be realized in connection with doubt: "The possibility of doubt is...the possibility of faith itself" (62). Doubt along with its constituents disorder, dissonance, and confusion is the destructive element within which the visionary mind must learn to swim. Conversely and paradoxically, to not doubt is to be incapable of escaping confusion. Such an individual "mistakes the fleeting moments of his daily life, the false comforts, complacency and ignorance for a secure possession and he fools himself into believing that he is docked in a port toward which he never set out" (64). This is certainly

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authenticity of Seeger's choice here may be questioned; that is, is his disavowal of a militant stance in response to the perceived malevolence surrounding him an instance of bad faith? Seeger's experience in the war attests to his will to confront physical brutality and chaos. Based on this we must assume, I think, that Seeger's daily life will be conducted in full visionary knowledge of and existential readiness toward other manifestations of brutality and chaos he will encounter.

Seeger's ("People of all kinds had seemed to like him all his life") and Miss Lonelyhearts' (He hopes his advice column might lead to a gossip column) ontological state prior to receiving their respective letters.

For both Miss Lonelyhearts and Seeger the letters are documents which create faith, a religious faith in the former case; a secular one in the latter. Miss Lonelyhearts fervid and deadly embrace of Doyle is a microcosm of his attitude toward the world, a Christ-like stance taken in the face of overpowering evidence of, at best, God's disinterest in the human enterprise; at worst, his total abdication of his divine responsibilities. Similarly, Seeger's embracing of life is undertaken in the face of the historical facticity of the holocaust and of his father's (accurate) assessment of how widespread the "poison" of anti-Semitism had become.

These acts are paradigms of courage and faith. As readers, we, too, must make our individual acts of faith in the belief that, much evidence to the contrary, literature can help us to make meaning of our condition. I believe that these two visionary fictions, divergent as they are in their intrinsic literary merits, help us toward that faith.

CHAPTER IV

READING IN THE CAVE:  
VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE DRAMA OF BECOMING VISIONARY

"Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being--like a worm."  
Sartre

"Nothing is more real than nothing." Samuel Beckett

"When one gave up seeing the beauty that clothed things, this  
was the skeleton underneath." The Voyage Out

"Books...I wonder what you find in them." The Voyage Out

The belief in the value of a dynamic and vital connection between the reading of literature and the living of life lies at the core of this study. Nowhere has that value been more cogently articulated and embraced than in the feminist literary enterprise of the past twenty-five years. The essays of feminist scholars who were in the vanguard of the movement are peppered with references both to this value and its antithesis, the Anglo-American formalist criticism, which denied this connection<sup>1</sup>. "Without stories," writes Carol Christ, "a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life....Without stories she cannot understand

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<sup>1</sup>Fraya Katz-Stoker refers to formalism as "that great block of aesthetic ice" (315). Certainly I am aware here of the reductive (and therefore inadequate) nature of my own comment about New Critical theory. It is, however, a revealing irony--and one seemingly often forgotten--that the New Critics "aesthetic iciness" was an attempt to discover in the "verbal icon" a source of order and meaning that had disappeared in the chaos and breakdown of modern society and the Yeatsian "fury and mire of human veins." As Iser makes the point, the New Critics had "called off the search for meaning" and focused instead on "the elements of the work and their interaction....The value of the work is measured by the harmony of its elements" (15). The critic's task became the clarification of the text's ambiguities. Therein did critics' essential skill become ingeniousness rather than insight. In effect, then, New Criticism offers another example of the figure-ground paradigm that informs visionary experience: it was an attempt to objectify and isolate the literary work/form through denying or ignoring the surrounding chaos from which it emerged. Feminist theory, conversely, seeks to utilize stories to "give shape to lives"; that is, its object is to plunge into the "ground" of lived experience--the destructive element--and create meaning there. Where the patriarchal enterprise is characterized by isolation, feminist thought is defined by connection. Schweikart argues that a "principle tenet of feminist criticism (is that) a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written" (46).

herself....Stories give shape to lives" (1). Florence Howe believes that "the classroom should function in response to real needs and questions of students and teachers; and on the other hand that out of the classroom should flow some lively literary and aesthetic debate rooted in the lives and understanding of women" (260). Nancy Burr Evans recalls being "betrayed" by the "tight-fisted influence of my traditional English major upbringing; I was self-conscious about doing what I thought should be most basic and natural: relating literature to life" (309). Indeed, the image of a "tight fist" is taken to its political extreme by Fraya Katz-Stoker who sees as "suspicious" that the rise of the New Criticism coincided with "American and English businessmen...arming Hitler as 'a bulwark against communism'", and that the New Critics replaced "an extraordinarily vigorous sociological approach which...dominated the middle 30's" (322).

The immediacy and vigor of feminist critical concerns have run unabated through the present day, and their stress continues on ways in which the experience of literature can affect lives and effect change. Patrocinio Schweickart emphasizes feminist criticism as a "mode of praxis. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world" (39). Sharon O'Brien reflects eloquently on her experience of writing a biography of Willa Cather, of how it "shaped" her own life, allowing her to reconcile her personal experiences of other powerful women

(not men) "who tried to erase me without ever seeing who I was." O'Brien recognizes, too, her indebtedness to the feminist scholars who preceded her: "For the questions we can ask of and about our subjects are shaped...by the critical conversations available to us at the time" (24). I would suggest that the questions being asked by feminist critics are marked by an authenticity, vitality and passion transcending the arguments of other literary schools because the feminists' goals are finally ontological rather than the "simply" professional and intellectual stakes traditional to the academy; feminism is a mode of thought "alive" in Heinemann's sense of that which might elucidate our position or offer solutions to our problems; in existential terms, it is a criticism conducted in Sartrean "good faith," and as such offers a powerful venue for the playing out of visionary fictions<sup>2</sup>.

Christ's analysis, in particular, speaks to some of the core issues of visionary experience. She cites the "sacred dimension" present in the ability of some stories to orient the reader to what Stephen Crites' elsewhere calls "the great powers that establish the reality of (the reader's) world." These writers are not speaking "merely" of deities here, but

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<sup>2</sup>In speaking of the evolution of reader-response criticism, for example, Schweickart cites "the relative tranquility of tone" of various strands of that school which "overlook issues of race, class, and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these sufferings" (35).

more of the existential forces against which a person must contend and upon which she must grow in the battle for selfhood: "They may ground a person in powers of being that enable her to challenge conventional values or expected roles" (3).

But the core of the feminist critique is the reaction against unauthentic stories a patriarchal culture supplies (or imposes upon) a woman, stories which "do not validate what she thinks or feels" (5). Denied authentic stories, Christ argues, there is a sense in which a woman is "not alive. Continually trying to fit her possibilities into stories where her reality is not acknowledged, a woman experiences nothingness, and perhaps even contemplates suicide..." (6-7).

Clearly, a major aspect of an individual's realizing her authentic self is in the existential choice of a story to fulfill. Schweikart observes that what the feminist reader reads is of equal consequence with the how of any theoretical stance she might assume. Indeed, the forces that would pressure a woman toward traditional and therefore crippling ways of being were omnipresent in the pre-feminist "institutional narratives" supplied by family, culture, education, religion, and art--not to mention the myriad permutations within these categories<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, each of these

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<sup>3</sup>For example, in The Voyage Out Helen Ambrose offers Rachel Vinrace "Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life" as an inducement "to think" and as a way of lessening Rachel's immersion in music. As my analysis of the novel will demonstrate, Rachel is defined by her propensity

institutions often works against the "stories" offered by the others. For men, the experiences of formal education and thus of literature have traditionally (perhaps ideally) functioned as critiques of the narrative patterns imposed by culture, family and religion. For women, the struggle to canonize texts which would critique and shape their experiences beyond the academy has formed the feminist drama of the past quarter century. For Michael Novak, any individual--man or woman--who lives devoid of a structuring story experiences, as Christ says of women, "nothingness: the primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring. Why become anything at all? Does anything make any difference? Why not simply die?...Or drift: which is a death-in-life" (Ascent, 52). These are, of course, reiterations of the ineffable and dangerous core questions underlying this study--"how to be" and "whether to be"--questions Novak labels "religious" in nature. Such questions, I have tried to show, are at the heart of all visionary fictions; most importantly, I contend that these stories--in an age of cultural fragmentation,

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for question and analysis; Helen, however, is responding to a different paradigm regarding what constitutes "thought." Woolf, who was meticulous in her choice of literary allusions, would seem to be here alluding to three historic paths imposed on women: the use of wit and feminine charm as a means of survival, an idealized romanticism, or absorption into "family life." Annette Kolodny reminds us that "Insofar as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts, but paradigms..." (10). Significantly, then, Rachel declines Helen's selections and chooses instead "modern books" (124).

intellectual confusion and spiritual malaise--provide the structuring narratives for us all<sup>4</sup>.

In Christ's feminist analysis of the role of stories, the most powerful are those which delineate the spiritual quest of women: "Her awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe:

A woman's spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation, but it is strengthened by being shared. It involves asking basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? (8)

Again, these ur-questions challenge the foundations of accepted reality; that is, the stories of (patriarchal) culture and family, and (organized) religion that have heretofore defined reality and the woman's place within it. The stories by women which oppose these traditional narratives possess, for Christ, "both a spiritual and a social dimension" wherein the process of women's spiritual quest moves from the experience of nothingness, to awakening, to renaming, and culminates in a reemergence in the world.

It begins in an experience of nothingness. Women experience emptiness in their own lives--in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives. Experiencing nothingness, women reject conventional solutions and question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value. The experience of nothingness often precedes an awakening, similar to a conversion experience, in which the powers of being are revealed. A woman's awakening to new powers grounds her in a

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. my comments on the ending of "The Brink of Darkness."

new sense of self and a new orientation in the world. (13) (emphases mine)

Certainly the experience of nothingness--of the recognition that the self is a culturally imposed entity--is not gender specific. Men are perhaps even more susceptible to culturally imposed roles and perceptions of reality and morality than are women. The distinction, of course, has always been in the relative breadth of men's choices within a particular culture and in the power inherent in those possibilities. But the experience of the female visionary extends this commonplace, reminding us that prior to the feminist movement of the last quarter of this century, it was only men who could discover solace and some level of meaning in the rhythms and structures of daily life--regardless of how tenuousness or illusory that order might be. And while historically the legal status of women had begun to change substantially by the time Virginia Woolf began writing her first novel in 1908, Woolf could still have a male character ask of a female:

"I've often walked along the streets where people live in a row, and one house is exactly like another house, and wondered what on earth the women were doing inside....Doesn't it make your blood boil?...I'm sure if I were a woman I'd blow someone's brains out." (VO, 215)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>It is perhaps illuminating that when Woolf has a male project himself into a woman's position, his frustration will result in his shooting someone else; however, in A Room Of One's Own she notes that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in a lonely cottage outside the village... feared and mocked at" (51).

For the enlightened woman, then, there really existed little choice for creating a self--except perhaps through literature, a point Woolf makes eloquently in A Room of One's Own. Indeed, despite Woolf's reservations in that book that women had not yet developed a truly feminist art, the narratives of Victorian female characters must surely have offered women readers the first ontological maps for selfhood.

Christ sees patriarchal hegemony as the lie from which women must continue to awaken and the root of their spiritual quest. Novak, as noted above, perceives the experience much more radically as one of "primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring" (emphasis mine). But in addition to their focus upon the primacy of the experience of nothingness, Novak and Christ also share the discovery of the roots of that experience in the "deepest recesses of human consciousness, in its irrepressible tendency to ask questions" (Experience, 14). In visionary experience the concepts of questioning and nothingness are inextricably linked because the visionary's ultimate questions are met with a universal silence:

When I perceive the drive to question in its purity, apart from the products to which it leads me, I perceive the ambiguity of my own conscious life. I recognize the formlessness, the aimlessness, and the disunity implicit in my own insignificance, my mortality, my ultimate dissolution. I peer into madness, chaos, and death. These insights are true insights. Not to experience them is to evade the character of one's own consciousness. It is to live a lie. The experience of nothingness bears the taste of honesty. (Novak, Experience, 15)

As I have suggested, an interrogative posture is indicative of the visionary consciousness. Implicitly or explicitly, the visionary is an unrelenting, even ruthless questioner of all the values--including the very nature of reality itself--which form the foundations of quotidian life. Because those values and bases have remained unremittingly patriarchal, women offer some of the most cogent critiques of the culture which produced them.

It is not surprising, then, that Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist of The Voyage Out, is defined by her propensity for radical questioning, a drive which frees her from her perception of her life as a "creeping, hedged-in thing," confronts her with the experience of nothingness, and plunges her into existential awareness. The outline of Woolf's first novel is straightforward enough: At the age of twenty-four, Rachel, who has been more isolated than raised by maiden aunts in England<sup>6</sup>, accompanies her father, Willoughby, aboard his ship, the Euphrosyne, bound for South America. Joining them are Rachel's deceased mother's sister, Helen, and her husband,

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<sup>6</sup>Woolf acutely traces Rachel's epistemological isolation: "Her mind was in the state of an intelligent man's in the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth; she would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said....She was of course brought up with excessive care, which as a child was for her health; as a girl and a young woman for what it seems almost crude to call her morals. Until quite lately she had been completely ignorant that for women such things existed. She groped for knowledge in old books, and found it in repulsive chunks...." (34-5). Woolf's interest in how individuals learn and manifest knowledge is most richly realized in To the Lighthouse in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

Ridley. Simultaneously appalled and fascinated by the narrowness of Rachel's experience, Helen suggests that Rachel remain with them among the (largely eccentric) English community on the small island of Santa Marina while Willoughby journeys down the Amazon. During her stay, Rachel falls in love with a young Englishman and aspiring novelist, Terence Hewet, who has travelled out with his effete friend, St. John Hirst. The pair plans marriage, but during a river excursion of their own, Rachel contracts a fever and dies. The novel concludes in images which frame the response of the community to Rachel's passing.

Not surprisingly, the critical heritage of The Voyage Out has evolved much more slowly than those of the novels of Woolf's artistic maturity, but I would suggest that the lack of unity many critics cite as a weakness of The Voyage Out to be one of its strengths. The book's numerous thematic concerns and its utilization of an array of imperfectly realized characters in fact reflect the realities that life is unified by nothing but its fragmentation, and the apparent impossibility of knowing anyone--even ourselves--with anything approaching certitude. Life, despite humankind's devout efforts, is most assuredly not a row of gig lamps symmetrically arranged.

The roots of Rachel's radical questioning transcend her naivete and ignorance, the fruits of her cloistered youth in England, and lie instead in her visionary consciousness, which

in effect compels her to see and question what others choose to ignore or passively accept. Rachel's nature is interrogative--not simply inquisitive or precocious--but radically interrogative. Novak reminds us that the drive to question is innate and preverbal; that is, it is a way of being, which, on the one hand, allows the individual to "keep altering his views of world and self...(and) to direct his own evolution" while, on the other, raising the uniquely human specter of anxiety and its attendant realizations of loneliness and mortality:

For by his endless drive to question a man sooner or later may perceive that all his supports offered by his culture, his social position, and his achievements do not remove the fundamental law of consciousness: he stands alone in a darkness and must die. (Nothingness, 48).

Richard Dalloway's kissing of Rachel during the outward voyage is often cited as the symbolic awakening of her consciousness, one which is fraught with nightmare images<sup>7</sup>. As Novak suggests, the emotional and psychic crisis that Rachel experiences here occurs within a wholly indifferent universe ("Far out between the waves little black and white sea birds were riding. Rising and falling with smooth and graceful movements in the hallows of the waves they seemed singularly detached and unconcerned") and anticipates her credo that life "seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed

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<sup>7</sup>The nightmare precipitated by Dalloway's advance contains a narrative coherence and specificity that suggests its basis in Woolf's own experience.

at," possibilities which carry with them the harrowing price of seeing "beneath the beauty that clothed things"<sup>8</sup>. Hence, when she next sees Dalloway, Rachel feels "uncomfortable, as if she and Richard had seen something together which is hidden in ordinary life, so that they did not like to look at each other" (76-7).

Rachel's unblinking questioning of the ideologies of the people and ideas she encounters allows her to experience both ends of Novak's ontological spectrum: she assumes control and responsibility for her own growth, an evolution which leads ineluctably to her perception of her isolation and her confrontation with death. With these thematic bases in mind, Rachel's customary discourse--"What I want to know is this: What is the truth? What is the truth of it all" or "And life, what was that?" (123, 125) becomes integral, not pretentious. This is evident in Rachel's memory of her childhood and adolescence in England, a period in which the poverty of her formal education ironically left her "abundant time for thinking" (35). Much of that reflection, not surprisingly, was bestowed upon the aunts who essentially defined reality for Rachel: "Why did they do the things they did, and what did they feel, and what was it all about?" She finds "unspeakably

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Dalloway following a violent storm at sea. As the storm subsides, "the ordinary world slipped into his mind, and by the time he was dressed he was an English gentleman again" (73). The same dichotomy between the appearance of civility and institutions, and the reality of mendacity and chaos is present in Dalloway's assault upon Rachel. See below, p. 142.

odd" the "whole system in which they lived" and questions Helen (in the present) as to whether she is "fond" of the aunts. "My dear child, what questions you do ask!" Helen responds<sup>9</sup>.

This same pattern is repeated in Rachel's first shipboard encounter with Richard Dalloway, a former Member of Parliament, who, with his wife Clarissa, shares a portion of the outward journey. The fairly lengthy scene (pp.63-9) is fueled by Rachel's numerous questions and by her tenacious insistence on lucid answers. Rachel feels a genuine warmth and attraction for Dalloway, and he in turn is flattered by even a socially naive young girl's obvious interest in his tepid accomplishments and shopworn ideas. But what is fascinating in the exchange is the manner in which Rachel's honest and incisive questions lay bare Dalloway's insidious nature; more than through his respectable misogyny (women do not possess the "political instinct...It's far better that you should know

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<sup>9</sup>In her ability to be struck by a kind of wonder or awe by the life choices of others, Rachel's vision possesses a distinctly Romantic flavor. The isolation of her upbringing and her interrogative habits of mind join to make strange and fresh to her the world and its inhabitants. As with her reaction to her aunts' lives, we see Rachel emerging from her Uncle Ridley's study, "lost in wonder at her uncle, and his books, and his neglect of dances, and his queer, utterly inexplicable, but apparently satisfactory view of life" (172). Later, on a solitary walk, she encounters a tree: "It was an ordinary tree, but to her it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world...Having seen a sight that would last her for a lifetime, and for a lifetime would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees..." (174).

nothing")<sup>10</sup> Dalloway defines himself as a member of the political establishment: "I can conceive of no more exalted aim," he asserts, "(than) to be the citizen of the Empire." Yet the brutality and violence that lie beneath the institutionalized order of empire remain unacknowledged save for Dalloway's ironic metaphor of the state as "a complicated machine" whose efficiency is imperilled "if the meanest screw fails its task" and in Woolf's trenchant conclusion of the interview through the appearance on the horizon of English warships<sup>11</sup>. Subtly, he is exposed as akin to Rachel's father: a component of the insidious male machine that seeks to keep her life "a creeping, hedged-in thing."

Rachel's innocence of the codes of social intercourse offers other (non-visionary) characters a convenient way to deflect the implications of her queries. She becomes, in effect, benignly objectified as "child," "puppy" or "eccentric"--and thereby marginalized. Helen, for example, describes Rachel's propensity for questioning as "brave and foolish"<sup>12</sup> and compares her to "a puppy that brings one's

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Woolf's letter in response to a Desmond MacCarthy review of Arnold Bennett's Our Women in the New Statesman. The intellectual inferiority of women to men, wrote MacCarthy, "stares him in the face" (Barrett, M. 55).

<sup>11</sup>It was Conrad who would document the underbelly of colonialism.

<sup>12</sup>The attribution of this phrase to Helen is not entirely accurate. The passage actually reads "Again Helen laughed at her, benignantly strewing her with handfuls of the long tasseled grass, for she was so brave and so foolish." This is characteristic of what might be termed the luminous quality of

underclothes down into the hall" (145). It is particularly important to understand that those who inhabit the quotidian consciousness are equally aware of the insistent presence of questions. Christ speaks of her preference for the term "awakening" to "conversion" because the former "suggests that the self needs only to notice what is already there...that the ability to see or to know is within the self, once the sleeping draft is refused" (18)<sup>13</sup>. The essential distinction, then, between the visionary and quotidian ways of being lies precisely in characters' existential stance before the facticity of questions which confront the nature and meaning of both our daily lives and spiritual condition. The visionary chooses immersion in the potentially destructive element of full consciousness of a world defined by its absence of answers and establishes his or her being within that void/ground; the quotidian mind rejects or ignores that emptiness, establishing being against the void by creating institutions and systems which supply a sham teleology and

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Woolf's narrative voice, a presence that hovers around and often intermingles with the characters' direct thoughts. The resulting ambiguity is, in light of Woolf's later fiction, clearly intentional and not a case of a young writer struggling to find her voice. While clearly this type of indirect quotation has a long literary precedence, it is nonetheless exceedingly appropriate here given that the central problem of The Voyage Out and of Woolf's fiction as a whole is the bridging of the ontological gap between individuals. For a lucid discussion of this issue see Naremore, especially pages 32-42.

<sup>13</sup>Recall that the ancient Greek root for "truth" is "unhiddenness." Socrates, too, taught that truth resided within each individual.

tenuous harmony to our daily lives. Both ways of being, of course, occupy the same psychic and ontological space. We are within the realm of Plato's Cave here, an allusion which I will illustrate to be the controlling image of Woolf's first novel.

A scene in which members of the English party ride to the top of a scenic summit will serve as a microcosm of this dichotomy of being. This is the setting of the first true conversation among the novel's four central characters. As a way of beginning to know one another--always the central issue in Woolf's fiction<sup>14</sup>--Hirst proposes that each offer an autobiographical sketch. Rachel begins, adumbrating her life in terms of male facticity<sup>15</sup>: age, parentage, living arrangements:

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<sup>14</sup>During Rachel's encounter with the Dalloways on the voyage out, Richard observes, "D'you know, Miss Vinrace, you've made me think? How little, after all, one can tell anybody about one's life! Here I sit; there you sit; both, I doubt not, chock-full of the most interesting experiences, ideas, emotions; yet how communicate? I've told you what every second person you meet might tell you" (68).

<sup>15</sup>The perhaps now too familiar gender distinction between male preoccupation with facts and female orientation toward emotion is present throughout Woolf's novel. When Hewet strays from facticity in his autobiographical sketch and begins to offer an impressionistic account of his father's death, Hirst scolds him to "keep to the facts" (144). Later Hewet himself, in defense of Hirst, chides Rachel: "But you'll never see it...because with all your virtues you don't, and you never will, care with every fibre of your being for the pursuit of truth! You've no respect for facts, Rachel; you're essentially feminine" (295). And Helen muses that Hirst "took her outside this little world of love and emotion. He had a grasp of facts" (304).

Rachel stated that she was twenty-four years of age, the daughter of a ship-owner, that she had never been properly educated; played the piano, had no brothers or sisters, and lived at Richmond with her aunts, her mother being dead. (143)

For all its reticence and brevity, Rachel's self-portrait reveals an existence of abject isolation. She lacks both mother and siblings, the very relationships by which she defines herself; moreover, we know her father to be physically and emotionally absent<sup>16</sup> and her maiden aunts to be the vehicle of her relative ignorance. She is, it would seem, without a female model upon whom she might shape her life.

Rachel's stark self-portrait cogently illustrates--partly through its very starkness--the "experience of nothingness" which Christ cites as the prelude to female awakening. While Rachel identifies herself in terms of the dead and the distant, it is Helen who cites the inadequacy of their autobiographical sketches<sup>17</sup>--"But of course we've left

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<sup>16</sup>This characterization is to give Willoughby the benefit of the doubt. The following passage in which he acquiesces to Rachel's remaining with Helen in Santa Rosa intimates an oblivious selfishness bordering on the insidious: "I want to bring her up as her mother would have wished. I don't hold with these modern views--any more than you do, eh? She's a nice quiet girl, devoted to her music--a little less of that would do no harm. Still, it's kept her happy, and we lead a very quiet life at Richmond....I'm beginning to realize...that all this is tending to Parliament....I should want Rachel to be able to take more part in things. A certain amount of entertaining would be necessary--dinners, an occasional evening party....In all these ways Rachel could be of great help to me" (85-6).

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Later in the novel, when Helen comes to write Rachel's father of his daughter's betrothal to Hewet, it is observed that Helen "had dwelt so often upon Mr. Hewet's prospects, his profession, his birth, appearance, and

out the only questions that matter"--before deflecting the intuitive insight of her remark with what I read as an insincere, sophisticate's question: "For instance, are we Christians?" Precocious rationalists, Hewet and Hirst fall over themselves denying faith, while Rachel affirms hers. Typically, Hirst tasks her response, and Rachel, in what might serve as the visionary's credo, reaffirms her belief with something akin to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith:

"I believe--I believe," Rachel stammered, "I believe there are things we don't know about, and the world might change in a minute and anything appear."

Again Woolf utilizes Rachel's social naivete--her stuttering and statement of an exceedingly vague, apparently jejune intuition<sup>18</sup>--to mask what is in fact the philosophical center of her novel: a belief in the inadequacy of everyday experience and "common wisdom" (rationality) as a guide to reality and, ultimately, meaning. Where rational philosophers hold the emotions suspect, the existentialists view them as a

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temperament, that she had almost forgotten what he was really like" (304).

<sup>18</sup>Leaska observes that each of Woolf's novels poses a question "which may appear embarrassingly naive" (4). Indeed, one of my strongest original impressions of Woolf's work was of the felicity with which she could have characters ask questions revolving around "the meaning of life." Furthermore, in a review titled, appropriately enough, "Moments of Vision," Woolf speaks of a particular author's need to capture moments "almost menacing with meaning. Such moments of vision are of an unaccountable, ineffable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen" (Essays, v. 2, p. 251).

reliable guide to the individual's involvement in and reflection upon his or her existential situation. As in the emotion evident in her "credo" above, Rachel is continually reflected through emotion. Moreover, I would characterize Rachel's statement as instinctively existential in its suggestion of humankind's need to transcend through perception and action its present limits; to, in effect, "uncover" the truth hidden by what might be termed a "conspiracy of reason." Rachel's integrity--her authenticity--is inherent in her stuttering: she is groping after the ineffable. Conversely, Helen, Hewet, and Hirst are engaged in an insincere discourse, in effect a kind of idle chatter, which, because of its very pervasiveness, has abrogated the right to name reality<sup>19</sup>. The distinction here is between the use of language as language (or as a way of filling or buffering the existential void) and the use of language as a tool to apprehend and confront the void's reality. Macquarrie notes:

...language has been diverted from its true function--the words are passed along, but they are heard as words. The disclosure does not take place; we are not allowed to see or appropriate for ourselves the reality that the words are about. So the existentialist favors a return to the sources, an exposure to the way things are rather than the way they are said to be. (148)

It is worth noting here that in her own life in Bloomsbury, Woolf was surrounded by those whose faith upheld the absolute primacy of reason; their bible was G.E. Moore's

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. the uses of language of Susan Warrington and Miss Allan cited below.

Principia Ethica, whose epigraph is the antithesis of Rachel's credo: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, nothing in Woolf's fiction would validate this philosophy. Her most insightful--which is to say visionary--characters may be defined by their perception of the complexity and manifold nature of objects and people and, most importantly, of how this understanding leads to one's ultimate connection with them. Indeed, just this idea forms the conclusion of Woolf's two finest novels: the "connection" of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway, and the "reformation" of Mr. Ramsay in the eyes of his estranged children in To The Lighthouse. It is in the latter novel, too, that Mrs. Ramsay, prompted by the stroke of the lighthouse beam, experiences union: "It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one, in a sense were one" (97). This is particularly interesting given an experience Rachel has while walking alone in Santa Marina:

So she might have walked until she lost all knowledge of her way, had it not been for the interruption of a tree....It was an ordinary tree, but to her it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world. Dark was the trunk in the middle, and the branches sprang here and there, leaving jagged intervals of light between them as distinctly as if it had but that second sprang from the ground. Having seen a sight that would last her a lifetime, and for a lifetime

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<sup>20</sup>Indeed, it is surely Moore's work which is identified as Helen's "black volume of philosophy" from which she reads "a sentence about the Reality of Matter, or the Nature of the Good" as she embroiders on the deck of the Euphrosyne (32-3).

would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees.

Rachel continues her walk now conscious that the "flowers and even pebbles in the earth had their own life and disposition, and brought back the feelings of a child to whom they were companions" (174).

Given this sharp divergence about the nature of reality, it is revealing to note that Moore and his work were imbued by Leonard Woolf and most of the other (male) Bloomsbury denizens with a talismanic power:

The tremendous influence of Moore and his book upon us came from the fact that they suddenly removed from our eyes an obscuring accumulation of scales, cobwebs, and curtains, revealing for the first time to us, so it seemed, the nature of truth and reality, of good and evil and character and conduct, substituting for the religious and philosophical nightmares, delusions, hallucinations in which Jehovah, Christ, and St. Paul, Plato, Kant, and Hegel had entangled us, the fresh air and pure light of plain common sense.  
(93)

Quentin Bell speaks of "the mute circle of seekers after truth who sat puffing their pipes around the discreet shrine of G.E. Moore" and who, having "received the Gospel of Principia Ethica regarded themselves as the elect" (105 and 184).

These reminiscences paint a daunting ideological tableau even for the rarified air of Bloomsbury and therein serve to fix both Virginia's courage in 1909--when she was in the midst of composing The Voyage Out--in directly opposing Moore's

thought to her friends<sup>21</sup> and, later, the integrity of her art, which never wavered from the principle annunciated in Rachel's "credo." Mark Hussey suggests that Woolf "seems always to be seeking to express a perception of the numinous" (59); to discover "the things in the world we don't know about." Like her contemporary Conrad, Woolf offered no formal aesthetic theory, but her most influential essays<sup>22</sup> clearly delineate her engagement with capturing a reality lying not beyond the grasp of mundane experience but imbedded, even hidden within it--most famously, perhaps, in her image of life as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end<sup>23</sup>."

When Helen laughs at Rachel's profession of faith and accuses her of having led an unexamined life--"You're not a Christian. You've never thought what you are"--she is badly misreading her niece's comment. To be sure, Rachel is not a "Christian" in Helen's sense of a member of the

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<sup>21</sup>Bell writes, "In August, when she was at Manorbier, she had attacked that work which her Cambridge friends regarded practically as the gospel of their time: G.E. Moore's Principia Ethica. She had read it with some difficulty and great admiration. It is a little surprising that she should have so long postponed what was, one imagines, almost compulsory reading in Bloomsbury..." (145).

<sup>22</sup>I am speaking primarily of "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" here.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. The description in "Heart of Darkness" of the meaning of Marlow's tales emerging as "a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty haloes that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."

institutionalized Church; more importantly, however, Rachel is shown to think of little else but what she and those about her are. There is an important distinction implicit here between the natures of religion and philosophy. In common usage, "religion" implies belief (faith) in and worship of an omnipotent but unmanifested universal power. It is, of course, the existentialist contention of this study that that controlling force is absent; that we as individual men and women bear sole responsibility for our own conduct and fate. Rachel's thrice stated credo, then, is in the nature of a philosophy, which is defined by the need for understanding (the goal of questioning). Understanding is not innately an aspect of religion, hence "mystery" serves as one of religion's cognates. When Rachel's declaration provokes in her aunt a sense of the profound interrogative tenor of human experience--"And there are lots of other questions"--Helen backs away: "though perhaps we can't ask them yet." And Hewet, too, recognizes his essential impotence before the question: "The important questions, the really interesting ones. I doubt that one ever does ask them." What makes the visionary in turn distinctive from the philosopher is the manifestation of will: the insistence on structuring her existence upon the answers she perceives.

Rachel's visionary nature, then, reveals itself in contradistinction to others' reticence: "Slow to accept the fact that only a very few things can be said even by people

who know each other well, (Rachel) insisted on knowing what (Hewet) meant." Like a neophyte Oedipus, Rachel will have out the truth whether it leads her into social awkwardness or into the grasp of an implacable fate. Woolf, in writing of Plato's dialogues, had acknowledged the sheer intellectual stamina required of the truth seeker:

It is an exhausting process; to concentrate painfully upon the exact meaning of words; to judge what each admission involves; to follow intently, yet critically, the dwindling and changing of opinion as it hardens and intensifies into truth.  
(McNellie, 32)

The scene, however, concludes with the intrusion of other members of the party (Rachel's question of Hewet thus remaining unanswered), an entrance which might recall images of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave": "But again the sunny earth in front of them was crossed by fantastic wavering figures, the shadows of men and women."

Woolf's novel is rich with Platonic allusions and images<sup>24</sup>, suggesting, I feel, the tension between the two ways

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<sup>24</sup>While several of the book's key Platonic allusions will be incorporated into the main body of my argument, I will cite here a few others which illustrate my contention that even in her first novel Woolf was concerned with apprehending a reality transcending the "plain common sense" most immediately personified by Moore and his acolytes. In these passages, characters are seen watching a stream of people and objects pass before their eyes in a manner reminiscent of the prisoners of Plato's metaphorical cave. For example, early in the novel, as Helen and Ridley Ambrose are walking toward the Euphrosyne, Helen is overcome with emotion at the prospect of leaving her children behind. Wiping her eyes, she focuses upon the human parade of the opposite bank: "She saw also the arches of Waterloo Bridge and the carts moving across them, like the line of animals in a shooting gallery. They were seen blankly, but to see anything was of course to end her weeping

of being which form the conflict of visionary fictions: the life of the Cave, centered in an essentially passive and unexamined everyday experience; and that of the visionary realm of light, which is conducted, however, neither in the glow of an abstract "Form of the Good" nor in an Augustinian "Mind of God" but rather in the existential silence and shadow of a chaotic and indifferent universe.

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and begin to walk." However, Helen's reverie has in fact prepared her "to read" her fellow Londoners and perceive the void underlying the institutional patterns of civilization: the rich, the "bigoted workers," the poor, and tattered old men and women: "When one gave up seeing the beauty that clothed things, this was the skeleton beneath" (11-2). Again, during Rachel's illness, which approximates the experiencing of a metaphysical plane, Rachel is said to be "oblivious of the world outside, because it needed all her attention to follow the hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes" (340). That the onset of her fever is associated with a reading of Comus and that the visions themselves are of trees, savages, the sea and high towers suggests the psychosexual roots of Rachel's illness. Earlier, in another scene with strong undertones of sexual frustration, Rachel finds "intolerable" the partially deaf Mrs. Paley's inability to understand others and flees into a hotel cul-de-sac where she is confronted with more objects; set among Woolf's customary reference to a table and chair are a rusty inkstand, an ash-tray, an old French newspaper, and a pen with a broken nib, essentially objects of failed communication. For Rachel these objects represent "human lives. We're all asleep and dreaming," she concludes (257-58). Each of these Platonic allusions reveals the ordering structures of everyday life to be hiding the existential "beast" below. Helen's leaving of her children--no doubt with the best care available--is nonetheless associated with society's abandonment of the poor; Rachel's illness seems an attempt to elude marriage, perhaps civilization's key institution, yet one whose potential insidiousness is signaled by the "closet drama" Comus, a work whose sophistication "masks" a plot based on sexual bondage. Finally, the condition and isolation of the objects encountered in the hotel cul-de-sac belie both their ostensible purpose and the order and efficiency that a hotel should represent. "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."

The most powerful evocation of the Platonic underpinnings of The Voyage Out is to be discovered in the visionary's signature experience of an existential moment. Lying at the thematic heart of the novel, Woolf's treatment of Rachel's awakening possesses the ring of autobiographical revelation and is a graphic treatment of the visionary consciousness' rejection of the passivity of the quotidian. It occurs at a Santa Marina church where the members of the English colony have gathered for their traditional services. Their voices, lifted in prayer, are described as "childlike babble":

They felt themselves pathetically united and well-disposed towards each other. As if the prayer were a torch applied to fuel, a smoke seemed to rise automatically and fill the place with the ghosts of innumerable services on innumerable Sunday mornings at home. Susan Warrington in particular was conscious of the sweetest sense of sisterhood, as she covered her face with her hands and saw slips of bent backs through the chinks between her fingers. Her emotions rose calmly and evenly, approving of herself and of life at the same time.

Here Woolf images religion as a source of self-affirmation, not self-awareness; passivity, not integration. The emphasis is upon the service as a source of tradition, which is to say as an institution whose raison d'être is the imposition of an (ersatz) order and teleology on that which is formless and without meaning. Thus the diction of "smoke" and "ghosts" suggests death, not renewed life. Susan's self-impaired vision and the parishioners' bent backs further imply the blindness and submissiveness of their ontological state. This is the

realm of Sartre's "Les Saluds," the stinkers, those who wallow in their self-satisfaction, devoid of even the possibility of action or complaint<sup>25</sup>. And it is the realm, too, of the nineteenth century Copenhagen bourgeoisie, whom Kierkegaard reviled for their complacency and self-satisfaction, a critique which rendered him a virtual outcast and object of ridicule for much of his adult life.

The accuracy of this harsh appraisal is evident when this spirit of self-approbation is shattered by the reading of the psalm, the actual words of the spiritual text:

But having created this peaceful atmosphere Mr. Bax suddenly turned the page and read a psalm. Though he read it with no change of voice the mood was broken.

"Be merciful unto me, O God," he read, "for man goeth about to devour me: he is daily fighting and troubling me....They daily mistake my words: all that they imagine is to do me evil. They hold all together and hold themselves close....Break their teeth, O God, in their mouths; smite the jaw-bones of the lions, O Lord; let them fall away like water that runneth apace; and when they shoot their arrows let them be rooted out."

The word of God here is the antithesis of the order and harmony fabricated by the parishioners. It presents a Darwinian nightmare predicated, as Derrida might have it, upon the failure of the "postal principle": "they daily mistake my words." As if to ironically emphasize his confusion, the biblical speaker paradoxically calls upon the Lord for

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<sup>25</sup>Sartre conceived this category in response to what he perceived as the moral decay and ineffectualness of the French bourgeoisie in general and the Popular Front government in particular in responding to the threatening tide of the 30's.

retribution upon his enemies at the same time he invokes divine mercy, all in predatory oral images--"devour," "teeth," "jaw-bones"--which reduce humankind's distinctive gift for language to a predatory rumble.

Susan Warrington's response to the reading of the biblical passage is an acute rendering of the quotidian mind confronted with an uncongenial view of reality:

Nothing in Susan's experience at all corresponded with this, and as she had no love of language she had ceased to attend to such remarks, although she followed them with the same kind of mechanical respect with which she heard many of Lear's speeches read aloud. Her mind was still serene and really occupied with praise of her own nature and praise of God--that is of the solemn and satisfactory order of the world.

It is an essentially Augustan view of life: one which praises and promotes a self-serving and self-preserving conception of order (Cf. Heller's conception of "particularity) and meaning that neatly ignores life's encroaching shadows. Indeed, I did not use the adjective "Darwinian" above lightly. It will be recalled that Darwin's special contribution to our understanding of our species and its place in the cosmic scheme was not strictly speaking in the realm of evolution, a concept that had already gained considerable currency by the publication of Origin of the Species, but rather in his attribution of that process to the twin forces of "natural selection from accidental variations." It was the randomness implicit in "accidental variations" that posited the absence of teleology, meaning and order. Thus while the biblical

passage is sanctioned by the institution of the Church and passively if not indifferently accepted by its members as a part of God's word, its analysis in fact renders the universe as a cosmic crap shoot played out by the bewildered and perplexed who in effect seek in their God not a principle of universal purpose but instead a bigger gun with which to smash the Other--survival of the fittest.

The repression that Susan Warrington practices is only one strategy for escaping the implications of vision. The rest of the congregation feels an "inconvenience (at) the sudden intrusion of this old savage. They looked more secular and critical as they listened to the ravings of the old black man with a cloth round his loins cursing with vehement gesture by a camp fire in the desert." The strategy here is suppression; the visceral faith of a Job or an Abraham is demeaned, reduced to caricature through rendering the desert prophet a "savage"; his teachings "ravings." He becomes outsider, Other, madman. Even the idea of Christ is eviscerated, his passion and vehemence rendered vapid:

Then they returned to the New Testament and the sad and beautiful figure of Christ. While Christ spoke they made another effort to fit his interpretation of life upon the lives they lived, but as they were all different, some practical, some ambitious, some stupid, some wild and experimental, some in love, and some long past any feeling except a feeling of comfort, they did very different things with the words of Christ.

What is represented here is nothing so positive as a reader-response spirituality. Rather than uniting human beings

through their common essence, religion ironically reinforces their isolated existence. Nor is this a militant, contemptuous individuality but rather one marked by intellectual, moral, and spiritual torpor and passivity:

From their faces it seemed that for the most part they made no effort at all, and, recumbent as it were, accepted the ideas that the words gave as representing goodness, in the same way, no doubt, as one of those industrious needlewoman had accepted the bright ugly pattern on her mat as representing beauty.

Thus are "goodness" and "beauty"--religion and art--also effectively eviscerated by the quotidian mind.

This meaning is evident in Susan's "mechanical" response to the reading just as her disinterest in language reflects the speaker's own verbal ineffectuality. Religion, art, philosophy, anything that might move one toward unfamiliar ontological "ground" must be attended to "mechanically," its implications for being ignored. Michael Novak associates this way of life with the symbol-making capacity of human beings, the "poor tools" by which they "break down the flood of experience, selecting and distorting even as they make it manageable." The world of symbols--among which are numbered institutions like the church--represent humankind's "nostalgia for order and clarity" (49-50). But nostalgia, while offering a pleasant emotional interlude, is incapable of sustaining us in the present.

Opposed to and preceding the need to create symbols, which is essentially the realm of the quotidian, is the

visionary impulse to question, which, in Novak's analysis, disrupts the ordering capacity of symbols in two ways: "It directs attention to new experience, in unknown and often threatening areas, and it directs attention to distortions, contradictions, and limitations in our perceptions and our theories" (50). The question, Novak suggests, represents the "fertile source of the experience of nothingness" (115) and therefore of humankind's ontological anxiety as well:

The source of the experience of nothingness lies in the deepest recesses of human consciousness, in its irrepressible tendency to ask questions. The necessary condition for the experience of nothingness is that everything can be questioned. Whatever the presuppositions of a culture or a way of life, questions can be addressed against them and other alternatives can be imagined. Whatever the massive solidity of institutions, cultural forms, or basic symbols, accurately placed questions can shatter their claims upon us. The drive to ask questions is the most persistent and basic drive of human consciousness. It is the principle of the experience of nothingness. By exercising that drive, we come to doubt the definitions of the real, the true, and the good that our culture presents to us. Without this drive, cultural change would not be possible. What was sacred once would for all time be locked in unchanging sacredness. (14)

With this in mind, I wish to now examine the thematic core of The Voyage Out, Rachel's existential moment, which culminates her innate drive to question, offers a signature example of Platonic enlightenment, and functions as a paradoxical experience of alienation and inclusion. As with the visionaries we have already considered, Rachel's epiphany seems spontaneous, almost a gift of grace:

Whatever the reason might be, for the first time in her life, instead of slipping at once into some curious pleasant cloud of emotion, too familiar to be considered, Rachel listened critically to what was being said. By the time they had swung in an irregular way from prayer to psalm, from psalm to history, from history to poetry, and Mr. Bax was giving out his text, she was in a state of acute discomfort. Such was the discomfort she felt when she was forced to sit through an unsatisfactory piece of music badly played. Tantalized, enraged by the clumsy insensitiveness of the conductor, who put the stress on the wrong places, and annoyed by the vast flock of the audience tamely praising and acquiescing without knowing or caring, so she was now tantalized and enraged, only here, with eyes half shut and lips pursed together, the atmosphere of forced solemnity increased her anger.

The onset of Rachel's awakening manifests itself in terms of critical attention, which is to say "questioning," and questioning's end product: discomfort. This, then, is a mirror image of the quotidian state of "tame acquiescence" and comfort observed among her fellow worshipers. The "story," she clearly senses, is not being properly told; the prayers, psalms, history and poetry which are paraded before these prisoners are perceived by Rachel as mere shadows, shabby mock-ups of a profounder truth. Rachel is preparing to leave the cave:

All round her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel, while somewhere above her floated the idea which they could none of them grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea, an idea like a butterfly. One after another, vast and hard and cold, appeared to her the churches all over the world where this blundering effort and misunderstanding were perpetually going on, great buildings, filled with innumerable men and women, not seeing clearly, who finally gave up the effort to see, and relapsed tamely into praise and acquiescence, half-shutting their eyes and pursing

their lips. The thought had the same kind of physical discomfort that is caused by a film always coming between the eyes and the printed page. She did her best to brush away the film and to conceive something to be worshipped as the service went on, but failed, always misled by the voice of Mr. Bax saying things which misrepresented the idea, and by the patter of having inexpressive human voices falling round her like damp leaves. The effort was tiring and dispiriting.

A simple transposition in this passage of "cave" for "church" reveals Woolf's philosophical lineage here. These are the Platonic "prisoners" united by a Jamesian "healthy-mindedness"; having surrendered their conscious vigilance, they have embraced "passivity, not activity; relaxation, not intentness"; and "resign(ed) the care of (their) destiny to higher powers" (James, 110).

The awakening which Rachel experiences is, of course, anything but spontaneous. The interrogative habit of mind which I have suggested as Rachel's defining characteristic renders her epiphany a culmination, but in its disparity between cause and effect and in the manifestly spiritual affects of the experience, surely it adheres to Baja's definition of epiphany<sup>26</sup>. But, as always, where the epiphany offers spiritual sustenance and enlightenment, the existential moment reveals the destructive element of nothingness.

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<sup>26</sup>Beja defines epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind--the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it" (18).

But I feel that what is most significant about the passage is Woolf's metaphorical use of reading as a way of distinguishing between vision and blindness; that is, Rachel's vision of a universe of Platonic "caves" housing their multitudes of passive prisoners is equated with the "physical discomfort that is caused by a film always coming between the eyes and the printed page." Similarly, the passion and the Platonic allusion that distinguish Rachel's "reading" of her fellow parishioners/prisoners is present in her encounter with literary texts. For example, ensconced in her room in Santa Marina, Rachel engages books with precisely the intensity that Woolf had noted in the argumentation of Platonic dialogues: "Her whole body was constrained by the working of her mind," and she reads with "the curious literalness of one to whom written sentences are unfamiliar, and handling words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tables or chairs" (123-4). Rachel, that is, is presented as both naive and ideal reader. She approaches/sees the text as she approaches/lives her life: with an honesty and integrity that grants the actions (ideas, utterances, intentions) of others an inherent seriousness worthy of both her intellectual and ontological engagement. By imaging her way of reading in terms of Platonic ideal forms, Woolf simultaneously implies ways of reading, seeing, and, especially, being. Rachel shuts her book with "a deep breath, expressive of the wonder which always marks the transition

from the imaginary world to the real world." But for Rachel this obvious line of demarcation is less than impenetrable. Her reading matter here, Ibsen, always has the effect of rendering Rachel the most vivid thing in her mental landscape; moreover, "she acted (his plays) for days at a time, greatly to Helen's amusement<sup>27</sup>. It is Helen who seeks to supply Rachel with books as, ironically, a stimulus to thought and a balance to her niece's immersion in music. But where Helen "would have suggested Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life, Rachel chose modern books...which were tokens in her aunts' eyes of harsh wrangling and disputes about facts which had no such importance as the moderns claimed for them" (124).

Clearly, I feel, Woolf is intimating and validating a direct link here between how and what we read, and how we

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<sup>27</sup>While the particular work is unidentified here, an earlier draft had, not surprisingly, Rachel reading A Doll's House. Rachel's affinity for Ibsen becomes even clearer through remarks the playwright made as he was beginning the play:

"...there are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one in man, and another, altogether different, in woman. They do not understand each other; but in practical life the woman is judged by man's law as though she were not a woman but a man. The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong; natural feeling on the one hand, belief in authority on the other, have altogether bewildered her. A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view" (Marden, 8, emphasis mine).

live. While Helen reacts with "great amusement" to Rachel's assuming "for days at a time" the attitudes and views of literary heroines, the meticulousness and passion that Rachel brings to her interaction with texts carries over to her everyday life, allowing her "to come to conclusions, which had to be remodelled according to the adventures of the day...leaving always a small grain of belief behind them." Like Leda ravaged by Zeus, Rachel is able to put on the knowledge of every book she wrestles with. She is, as Carol Christ observed, seeking out those stories by which she may understand and give shape to her life.

This interaction between reading and being is illustrated in the scene following Rachel's closing of the text. "The exercise of reading (has) left her mind expanding and contracting like the mainspring of a clock." As with her reaction to her aunts quoted above and to her reading, the commonplace rhythms of everyday life are made strange to Rachel:

...she began to raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence. She was next overcome by the unspeakable queerness of the fact that she should be sitting in an arm-chair, in the morning, in the middle of the world. Who were the people moving in the house--moving things from one place to another? And life, what was that? It was only a light passing over the surface and vanishing, as in time she would vanish, though the furniture in the room would remain. Her dissolution became so complete that she could not raise her finger any more, and sat perfectly still, listening and looking at the same spot. It became stranger and stranger. She was overcome with awe that things should exist at all....She forgot that

she had any fingers to raise...The things that existed were so immense and so desolate...She continued to be conscious of these vast masses of substance for a long stretch of time, the clock still ticking in the midst of the universal silence.

In its melding of dread and awe; its anticipation of Heidegger's "Why is there something; why is there not nothing?"; and its emphasis upon time, space and silence, this passage offers a classic example of existential anguish of being, whose catalyst is Rachel's reading of the experience, awakening and revolution of Nora Helmer<sup>28</sup>.

Indeed, I believe that The Voyage Out is a novel about books and reading; Woolf's references to various literary works are at once legion and integral to her artistic aims. Beverly Ann Schlack contends that Woolf's use of literary allusion is "an organic part of the growth of her characterizations and of the development of the novel's thematic structure..."; moreover, it was a strategy which "came naturally" and was "a sheer habit of mind" to Woolf

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<sup>28</sup>There is at least one other important allusion working here. In Varieties of Religious Experience James notes, "I have no doubt whatever that most people live, whether physically, intellectually, or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness, and of their soul's resources in general, much like a man who, out of whole bodily organism, should get a habit of using and moving only his little finger. Great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed" (emphasis mine). While Woolf met (and was alternately amused and terrified by) Henry, I have been unable to ascertain whether she was familiar with William James's work. In any event, the thematic correspondences of the two remain striking.

("The Novelist's Voyage..." 317-18). More significant than the role it plays in revealing character to the reader, I feel, is the underlying assumption of Woolf's art of allusion: that the self is in no small part created by reading--both by what one reads and by how one reads<sup>29</sup>.

As if living without reading were inconceivable to Woolf, virtually all her characters are readers. Indeed, it is through her minor characters that Woolf seeks to reflect some uses to which literature is put. This is clear in the juxtaposition of the literary habits of Miss Allan, an English teacher, and Susan Warrington, who functions as a virtual quotidian antithesis of Rachel. The former is seen reading Wordsworth's Prelude because "she always read The Prelude abroad, and partly because she was engaged in writing a short Primer of English Literature--Beowulf to Swinburne--which would have a paragraph on Wordsworth" (103). Woolf's focus then melds into Susan's adjoining room where, realizing she has neglected her diary, Susan leaps from bed and proceeds "to write in the square ugly hand of a mature child, as she wrote daily year after year, keeping the diaries, though she seldom looked at them." Her entries chronicle the rhythms of quotidian life: people met, weather, appointments kept, and concludes with "Mem. ask about damp sheets" (104-05).

Both women utilize their reading and writing as a device to create a schematic life: to impose a desperate order and

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Carol Christ's comment on p. 2.

teleology upon lives which are formless and adrift. Like the passive parishioners who trigger Rachel's existential moment, Susan's diary, nominally a device for reflection, and Miss Allan's pursuit of a spiritual autobiography, have devolved into habitual, mechanical exercises characterized by reductive summary and ordering of experience rather than dynamic engagement with it. Theirs is indeed a precarious and desperate game: as long as they can sustain the illusion of order and meaning both women can retire "contentedly" and "comfortably"; yet, we are later told, "the mere glimpse of a world where dinner could be disregarded, or the table moved one inch from its accustomed place, filled (Miss Allan) with fears for her own stability" (129).

The pervasiveness of what I might dare to call the "wrong way" to read--that is the failure to link literature and living--is further reflected in the character of Ridley Ambrose, a classics scholar. Engaged in editing Pindar's odes, Ambrose is imaged as "an idol...deeply encircled by books," a device by which he effectively separates himself from being in the world while simultaneously imposing an ordering rhythm upon the microcosm of his home: "...every one was conscious that by observing certain rules, such as punctuality and quiet, by cooking well, and performing other small duties, one ode after another was satisfactorily restored, and they themselves shared the continuity of the scholar's life." But Woolf accentuates that the salvaging of the odes produces

neither communication nor revelation: "Unfortunately, as age puts one barrier between human beings, and learning another, and sex a third, Mr. Ambrose in his study was some thousand miles distant from the nearest human being, who in this household was inevitably a woman." On cue, Rachel enters his study, seeking Gibbon's History, which had been recommended by Hirst. Once she breaks through her uncle's absorption, Rachel is literally led by the arm about the study as Ambrose outlines an exclusively patriarchal course of study: "Plato...and Jorrocks...Sophocles, Swift...You should read Balzac. Then we come to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Pope, Johnson, Addison, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats. One thing leads to another."

Thus, for all his apparent benevolence and intellect, Ambrose denies or fails to recognize the efficacy of texts which would name and speak to Rachel's condition. He would deny her her story. Indeed, for Ambrose the ultimate value of literature is restricted to the Greeks: "But what's the use of reading if you don't read Greek<sup>30</sup>?" Woolf shared his admiration; it is among the heroes and heroines of Greek literature, Woolf observes, that we discover the "original human being" (McNeillie, 27). But she knows, too, how

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<sup>30</sup>Classical Greek culture, of course, was no more inclusive of women than most others in the West, largely banning them, for example, from attending--much less appearing in--the drama competitions at the public amphitheaters, which played such a central role in Greek civic and cultural life.

precarious are our attempts to ascertain the rhythms and pronunciation of the language, to grasp its inherent ambiguities. But for all that, Woolf sees truth as Rachel had stated it in her "credo"--as "various," capable of apprehending us in various guises: "it is not with the intellect alone that we perceive (truth)" (32). Such literary truth "is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words" (31). And, as if she were commenting directly upon Ambrose, Woolf reminds us that truth will not be realized apart from others: "It is not to the cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude that we are to turn, but to the well-sunned nature, the man who practices the art of living to the best advantage, so that nothing is stunted but some things are permanently more valuable than others" (33).

The balance that Woolf suggests above is perverted through the quotidian mind's counsel of proportion and reason, which are code words for blindness and withdrawal. Helen sees her fostering of Rachel's quotidian growth as one of facilitating her becoming "a reasonable person" (83) and disabusing her of her "absurd...ideas about life" (97, emphasis mine). Faced with Rachel's terror and confusion over being kissed by Richard Dalloway during the voyage, Helen advises that Rachel not think about the incident, that it is "a pity...to get things out of proportion," that one must

"take things as they are." Rachel, however, typically insists that she will "think about it all day and all night until I find out exactly what it does mean." Her insistent questioning reveals to her the predatory existence imaged in Mr. Bax's sermon: "...she saw her life for the first time as a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between two walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever--her life that was the only chance she had--the short season between two silences" (80-2). Similarly, Terence seeks to persuade her that "there was an order, a pattern which made life reasonable...for sometimes it seemed possible to understand why things happened as they did." In turn, Rachel brings to her relationship with Terence "curiosity and sensitiveness of perception"--question and vision--gifts against which, Terence realizes, the experience which she lacks would only lend a "ridiculous formal balance, like that of a drilled dog in the street" (300).

Indeed, the expression "keeping one's balance," as a metaphor for sanity reminds us of how much a learned response conventional conceptions of reality and reason are<sup>31</sup>. Such balance is anathema to the visionary. The "common wisdom" which characters like Helen and Terence seek to impart to Rachel is a form of indoctrination or absorption, a way of

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<sup>31</sup>Indeed, at the time of the publication of The Voyage Out, T.S. Eliot was arguing just this point in his doctoral dissertation. His thesis concluded with the observation that "reality is a convention," the culmination of a successful "theory."

preparing her to become like them, which can only be accomplished through stripping Rachel of her unique vision. That attack comes almost necessarily through the body, the instrument of perception. Therefore Richard's kiss, which in Adamic fashion he neatly attributes to Rachel's having "tempted" him, is a prelude to Terence's desire to possess her in marriage in the same manner as the nightmares engendered by Dalloway's assault foreshadow the fever--and the same recurrent subterranean nightmare<sup>32</sup>--which paradoxically destroys and preserves Rachel's body. In essence, her death signifies her refusal to become objectified as the repository of male passion.

Similar to its preoccupation with proportion and balance, the quotidian mind, as perhaps best exemplified by Miss Allan and Susan Warrington, is concerned with the passage of events, their chronology, not their significance or kairos<sup>33</sup>. "One thing follows another" becomes their refrain. We have seen this pattern present in the church service which moves mechanically from "prayer to psalm, from psalm to history, from history to poetry..." as well as in Ambrose's recitation of patriarchal authors: "One thing follows another." Similarly, Richard Dalloway's conception of English history is

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. pp. 77 and 331.

<sup>33</sup>The terms "chronos/kairos" are from the Greek and serve to delineate the two principal ways of viewing time in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In so doing, we are again reminded of the identic link between visionaries and Jews.

characterized by its "continuity": King following King, Prime Minister Prime Minister, and Law..." (51)<sup>34</sup>. Willoughby Vinrace whines at the prospect of losing control of his daughter: "We go on year after year without talking about these things....But it's better so" (85). The phrase's prominence leaves little doubt of the juxtaposition Woolf sought to create. Indeed, Rachel herself takes up this same refrain in naming the source of her inability to achieve a genuine intimacy with others: "The lives of these people...the aimlessness, the way they live. One goes from one to another, and it's all the same. One never gets what one wants out of any of them" (263). When Arthur Venning declares his affection for Susan, he couches his speech in dialectical terms of blindness and vision, emptiness and meaning, concluding in a Platonic image:

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<sup>34</sup>Dalloway's "vision of English history"--a kind of quotidian epiphany--comes upon him during a conversation with Clarissa. He images the line of governmental conservative policy as a "lasso that opened and caught things, enormous chunks of the habitable world." The predatory image recalls the scene discussed earlier between him and Rachel. Clarissa responds admiringly to his conception, "You see round, where I only see there," but, of course, her awakening to the experience of nothingness and subsequent vision will occur in a later novel. Her distinction is nonetheless enlightening. Where Richard views humanity from afar, abstractly ("That's my business"), Clarissa connects with individuals as she does tentatively in The Voyage Out with Rachel and more profoundly in Mrs. Dalloway with Septimus Smith. The scene concludes when, again recalling his kissing of Rachel, Dalloway passionately kisses Clarissa, causing her to drop a letter she was writing. Dalloway then takes her pen and appropriates her text, adding a postscript. The juxtaposition of passion and (appropriated) pen offers an intriguing illustration of the query which opens The Madwoman in the Attic.

"Odd things happen to one," said Arthur. One goes along smoothly enough, one thing following another, and it's all very jolly and plain sailing, and you think you know all about it, and suddenly one doesn't know where one is a bit, and everything seems different from what it used to seem. Now to-day, coming up that path, riding behind you, I seemed to see everything as if...as if it had a kind of meaning....It's because I love you."

After the couple embraces passionately Arthur "looks as if he were trying to put things seen in a dream beside real things" (138-39). Indeed, his declaration that "everything seems different from what it used to seem" is a cogent illustration of Rachel's credo. Yet the meaning with which love has presumably imbued Arthur's existence is ironically deflated later in the novel during a narrative disquisition upon the state of long-term marriages:

When two people have been married for years, they seem to become unconscious of each other's bodily presence so that they move as if alone, speak aloud things which they do not expect to be answered, and in general seem to experience all the comforts of solitude without its loneliness.

Commentators often view this passage positively as reflecting the attainment of a certain level of balance and harmony between the self and another. However, that Woolf viewed such a relationship as a sham is illustrated through a later scene between Helen and Ridley. She overhears her husband's solitary exclamations in the next room--"'So it goes on year after year; I wish, I wish, I wish I could make an end of it,' to which she paid no attention" (195). While Venning's epiphany reminds us that vision is natural to our nature, the later

citations demonstrate the ease with which we discard its grace and assume a quotidian posture.

It is further indicative of this quotidian perspective that despite the relative isolation and exotic nature of Santa Marina, most of its English community have mentally and spiritually transformed their hotel into an ersatz London and thus a veritable psychic barrier against the uncharted possibilities of the South American continent, which--like Conrad's jungle in Heart of Darkness--functions as the locus of the visionary and necessarily dark territories of the human mind. Therefore, even on the infrequent occasions when they venture outside their hotel, the English are assiduous in distancing themselves from the potentially unsettling effects of the experience. For example, when the expedition up Monte Rosa takes the travellers "higher and higher...separat(ing them) from the world," each rider keeps "his eyes fixed on the hobbling curved form of the rider and donkey in front of him." Once at the summit, they are "overcome with wonder at "the immense space...and infinite distances of South America....They felt themselves very small, and for some time no one said anything." Faced with tangible evidence of the contingency and insignificance of their existence, the quotidian pilgrims respond characteristically, one with a commonplace "Splendid," and Miss Allan through naming the points of the compass, thus exerting a tenuous

control over the implacability of nature (129-32). After luncheon, the travellers disperse into groups:

One of these parties was dominated by Hughling Elliot and Mrs. Thornbury, who, having both read the same books and considered the same questions, were now anxious to name the places beneath them and to hang upon them stores of information about navies and armies, political parties, natives and mineral products... (136).

One is reminded of the passengers' reaction to the subsiding of the storm encountered by the Euphrosyne: "...the mind of men, which had been unmoored...once more attached itself to the old beliefs....After their view of the strange underworld, inhabited by phantoms, people began to live among tea-pots and loaves of bread with greater zest than ever" (72). In the later passage, the complementary homogeneity and xenophobia of the quotidian scheme of life serves to reaffirm its adherents sense of reality while evading the darker, unnerving elements of vision. They, too, have their stories (of empire and exploitation), a closed canon which tolerates no heresies.

That assurance and hegemony is shattered, however, when Rachel and Terence, Hirst and Helen agree to a second "voyage out," accompanying the Flushings on a river expedition to a native village. When the party stops enroute along the river, only Rachel and Terence penetrate the forest. Helen chides them: "There's everything here--everything. What will you gain by walking?" And Hirst bids them to "beware of snakes" (270).

It is instructive to recall Helen's indifferent attitude when the journey was proposed, an ennui that had drawn Rachel's wrath. Helen, however, had been reacting to her own existential vision, which resonates with Hirst's warning:

Aimless, trivial, meaningless, oh no--what she had seen at tea made it impossible for her to believe that. The little jokes, the chatter, the inanities of the afternoon had shrivelled up before her eyes. Underneath the likings and spites, the coming togethers and partings, great things were happening--terrible things, because they were so great. Her sense of safety was shaken, as if beneath twigs and dead leaves she had seen the movement of a snake. It seemed to her that a moment's respite was allowed, a moment's make-believe, and then again the profound and reasonless law asserted itself, moulding them all to its liking, making and destroying. (263)

Helen, too, has seen but has made an existential choice to draw back from the abyss. She will instead watch with a mounting horror as Rachel attempts to traverse its rim.

Clearly, those who remain on the shore represent the schematic consciousness. They are defined by their refusal to cross boundaries<sup>35</sup>, and by their fervor to maintain the illusory safety of proportion and reason. Naremore sees The Voyage Out as a "wavering between two kinds of experience: the rational, orderly, mannered world of regular proportions and social relationships, and the deeper world of intense feeling where individuals lose their sense of separateness and blend with nature." He labels this latter world "feminine" and

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<sup>35</sup>Ironically, Hirst observes of the hotel's guests: "You could draw circles round the whole lot of them, and they'd never stray outside" (107).

suggests, correctly, that, because it is "more real and intense than ordinary life," because, moreover, it is "what ordinary life is all about" that this is the world which attracts Woolf.

This intensity and reality are not, to be sure, reassuring. The forest is a setting, Hirst complains, that "makes one awfully queer....These trees get on one's nerves--it's all so crazy. God's undoubtedly mad. What sane person could have conceived a wilderness like this, and peopled it with apes and alligators? I should go mad if I lived here--raving mad" (275). Hirst's response is far removed from the order and purpose posited in Aquinas's argument from design but Hirst's understanding is founded in experience, not reason.

As Rachel and Terence move into the forest, the sounds of "the ordinary world" are replaced by those suggesting that they are walking "at the bottom of the sea." The primordial image prepares us for the visionary's return to the elemental, which will culminate in the their arrival at the village and Rachel's subsequent death<sup>36</sup>. As part of that experience, the

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<sup>36</sup>The numerous manifestations in visionary texts of this confrontation with the elemental were outlined in my first chapter. Their function is to serve as objective correlatives of the futility of humankind's attempts to at once imbue our existence with meaning and to separate ourselves from our primal--and necessarily destructive--instincts. This particular sea image foreshadows Rachel's fatal fever:

She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors

couple must negotiate a critical confrontation between emotions and words. Because they live in a world where words often function to block emotion, they need to virtually recreate the process of truthful communication in order to give shape to the reality of their incipient emotion<sup>37</sup>:

"Does this frighten you?" Terence asked when the sound of fruit falling had completely died away.

"No," she answered. "I like it."

She repeated "I like it." ...There was another pause.

"You like being with me?" Terence asked.

"Yes, with you," she replied.

He was silent for a moment. Silence seemed to have fallen upon the world.

"That is what I have felt ever since I knew you," he replied. "We are happy together." He did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing.

"Very happy," she answered.

They continued to walk for some time in silence. Their steps unconsciously quickened.

"We love each other," Terence said.

"We love each other," she repeated.

The silence was then broken by their voices which joined in tones of strange unfamiliar sound which formed no words. (271)

Naremore suggests that the rhythms of this unusual passage are an attempt by Woolf to capture "the tentative conversation of lovers as they experience the sexual act," just as its "dimness and depth" signal Woolf's "more intense and

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thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea" (341).

<sup>37</sup>Naremore observes that in Woolf's treatment of experience, "words seem at times superfluous, sometimes even false to the experience of something that is nonverbal" (37). That "something that is nonverbal," I would suggest, might often be labeled as visionary experience.

meaningful states of feeling" (48-9). That the couple has, in fact, consummated their relationship would be consistent with the book's increasing emphasis on the crossing of borders. However, Rachel's apparently spontaneous "Terrible--terrible" reflects her recognition of the elemental terror of the human condition and of the fragility--perhaps the futility--of our attempts at sexual or verbal communion with one another<sup>38</sup>, of the price one pays for transgressing those borders<sup>39</sup>.

When the couple returns to the main party, their dialectical sincerity is contrasted with the "little meaningless words" spoken by Mr. Flushing, who is "flowing on, now about his wife, now about art, now about the future of the country...", which is to say, speaking of one thing after another (276). Hearing again the cadences of the quotidian

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<sup>38</sup>Cf. Helen's vision cited above. It is also worth noting that Rachel's comment here had been prepared for in chapter thirteen where her contemplation of an ur-question--"What is it to be in love?"--leaves her "awed by the discovery of a terrible possibility in life." The result of her visionary reflection upon the implications of love (the quotidian mind would trivialize the emotion or eviscerate its darker meanings) has "each word (of her question) seem(ing) to shove itself out into an unknown sea." Language, as ever, is rendered impotent before such questions.

<sup>39</sup>One of the most powerful examples of the wages of such "transgression" is accomplished through the juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated scenes. The first is Hewet's observation that a chicken can be killed by drawing a circle around it; the implication, of course, being that the bird is too passive to break through the line. Later, Rachel experiences "the other side of hotel life" when she unexpectedly observes a chicken being chased down in order to be killed and prepared for the guests' dinner. (Cf. the coyotes in "The Brink of Darkness.")

world, Rachel asks of her experience with Terence, "Is it true, or is it a dream?"

The Platonic allusion is carried forward as the boat approaches the native village. They pass a clearing that had once been the location of the hut of the explorer Mackenzie, "the man who went farther inland than anyone's been yet." As if in response to his stimulus, Rachel slips into a state of pure being, separated not only from the everyday world but also, Woolf suggests syntactically, from her own physical senses:

The eyes of Rachel saw nothing. Yellow and green shapes did, it is true, pass before them, but she only knew that one was large and another small; she did not know that they were trees. These directions to look here and there irritated her, as interruptions irritate a person absorbed in thought, although she was not thinking of anything.  
(277)

Rachel's trance-like state is mirrored during the Europeans' arrival at the Indian village whose "soft instinctive people" make the visitors feel like "tight-coated soldiers." The native women watch with the "motionless inexpressive gaze of those removed from each other far, far beyond the plunge of speech." The primal quality of the scene fills Rachel and Hewet with a sense of insignificance: "'So it would go on for ever and ever,' she said, 'those women sitting under the trees, the trees and the river'" (285). The trees and river function both as symbols of fertility and permanence, linking the primordial stream to Rachel's vision of the eternal nature of the native women:

Since the time of Elizabeth very few people had seen the river, and nothing had been done to change its appearance from what it was in the eyes of the Elizabethan voyagers. The time of Elizabeth was distant from the present time by a moment of space compared with the ages which had passed since the water had run between those banks, and the green thickets swarmed there, and the small trees grown to huge wrinkled trees in solitude. Changing only with the change of the sun and the clouds, the waving green mass had stood there for century after century, and the water had run between its banks ceaselessly, sometimes washing away earth and sometimes the branches of trees, while in other parts of the world one town had risen upon the ruins of another town, and the men in the towns had become more and more articulate and unlike each other. (264)

Woolf's comment upon the talk that flies among the Europeans in the microcosm of Santa Marina ("Words crossed the darkness but, not knowing where they fell, seemed to lack energy and substance" 286) perceives language's very sophistication as ironically delineating our separateness, isolation, and impotence: knowledge reveals nothingness; civilization is built upon civilization, thought upon thought, one thing follows another, culminating in, most infamously, the most civilized nation in history fostering the Nazi holocaust.

In contrast to this linguistic enervation, Rachel and, to a lesser extent, Hewet, are aligned with a transcendent nature "beyond the plunge of speech" where they are essentially relearning communication; their tentative happiness is tied specifically to their willingness to cross into nature's domain and generally to their willingness to question the tenets of quotidian consciousness. Yet such boldness exacts a piercing cost. It is this awareness that prompts Helen's

foreboding regarding the river journey. While her companions characteristically debate signs of European influence in the native jewelry, she chastises them for having come on the expedition at all, "for having ventured too far and exposed themselves" (286). It is perhaps inevitable that Rachel, having "advanced so far in the pursuit of wisdom," must undertake a final, all-consuming voyage of fire.

Daiches has written of the connection between death and the revelation of character in Woolf's work: "Death for (Woolf) was always the illuminator of and commentator on life, so that an adequate insight into any character is only given if he is shown not only living but also in some connection with death" (12). Therefore, the fatal fever that Rachel contracts as (presumably) a result of her river voyage functions, like language, as a device to delineate our separateness: "...at intervals she made an effort to cross over into the ordinary world, but she found that her heat and discomfort had put a gulf between her world and the ordinary world which she could not bridge" (329). Woolf's emphasis on the impotence of language to ameliorate our condition prepares us for the death, the ultimate separation, which Rachel's fever anticipates. Moreover, her death functions not as culmination to experience but rather as an emblem of the arbitrary and pernicious nature of existence.

This is realized both individually and communally. First, Woolf employs the psychic awakening of Terence and Evelyn

Murgatroyd to validate Rachel's own visionary experience. That is, as Kurtz taught Marlow and Marlow Heart of Darkness's primary narrator, so, too, does Rachel effect ontological change in those around her and, presumably, in us as readers as well. Indeed, Hewet functions as something of a Shelleyan epipsyche to Rachel. Confronted by her deepening illness, he has revealed to him the malignant underside of life:

He could not get used to his pain, it was a revelation to him. He had never realized before that underneath every action, underneath the life of every day, pain lies, quiescent, but ready to devour; he seemed to be able to see suffering, as if it were a fire, curling up over the edges of all action, eating away the lives of men and women. (344-45)

Like Rachel, he begins to analyze the meaning and implications of words: "He thought for the first time with understanding of words which before had seemed to him empty: the struggle of life; the hardness of life. Now he knew for himself that life is hard and full of suffering." He excoriates the blindness of his quotidian existence: "How had he dared to live as he had lived, rapidly and carelessly, passing from one thing to another, loving Rachel as he had loved her? Never again would he feel secure; he would never believe in the stability of life, or forget what depths of pain lie beneath small happiness and feelings of content and safety (emphasis mine)." And finally he immerses himself in an elemental, existential vision:

The light on his candle flickered over the boughs of a tree outside his window, and as the branch swayed in the darkness there came before his mind a

picture of all the world that lay outside his window; he thought of the immense river and the immense forest, the vast stretches of dry earth and the plains of the sea that encircled the earth; from the sea the sky rose steep and enormous, and the air washed profoundly between the sky and the sea. How vast and dark it must be tonight, lying exposed to the wind; and in all this great space it was curious to think how few the towns were, and how like little rings of light they were, scattered here and there among the swelling uncultivated folds of the world. And in those towns were little men and women, tiny men and women. Oh, it was absurd when one thought of it, to sit here in this little room suffering and caring. What did anything matter? The nearness of their bodies in this vast universe, and the minuteness of their bodies, seemed to him absurd and laughable. Nothing mattered, he repeated; they had no power, no hope. (344-45)

One might discern in Terence's reaction to the encroaching, palpable presence of death traces of the privileged and the pampered, a want of fortitude, an agony of the moment which will be assuaged by the passage of time and the pleasures of everyday life. Such a reading, Woolf makes clear in the next chapter's opening emphasis upon the "empty air...profound silence...the little inarticulate cries of children or of the very poor, of people who were very weak or in pain," would indicate the reader's own failure of vision. For the primary intent of visionary fictions--as is reflected through their concern with the interrelations of existential awakenings, the experience of reading, and metaphysical insight--is always on the evolution of and response to our own vision of our existential condition.

These concerns are carried forward in the responses of Mrs. Thornbury and Evelyn Murgatroyd to Rachel's death. Mrs.

Thornbury, the de facto matriarch of the English colony and, as such, a personification of tradition and good sense, learns of the news upon entering the hotel's lobby where the other guests have gathered. Like those who had experienced the storm aboard the Euphrosyne, and like Helen and Hewet before her, she, too, experiences an existential awakening to the implacable powers of her universe, one which is dressed in Platonic allusions. She watches her countrymen "standing beside the solid arm-chairs and tables," but the human beings look "unreal, or as people look who remain unconscious that some great explosion is about to take place beside them." However, the commonplace of death provokes "no explosion, and they went on standing by the chairs and tables." Now her vision penetrates through them "as though they were without substance," and sees instead "the figure of the dead lying still in the dark beneath the sheets." It is there that reality resides in a world that now appears to her "strangely empty."

Confronted with this vision of nothingness, Mrs. Thornbury totters on the brink of the abyss fabricating a desperate teleology: "And yet the older one grows...the more certain one becomes that there is a reason. How could one go on if there was no reason?...There must be a reason. It can't only be an accident. For it was an accident--it need never have happened....But we must not let ourselves think of that." She wanders from room to room, guest to guest seeking meaning,

but the essential question remains: "There must be some reason why such things happen....Only at first it was not easy to understand what it was." Ultimately, Mrs. Thornbury finds solace in an ethical utilitarianism, perhaps the epitome of rationalism:

She thought very quickly and very clearly, and, looking back over all her experiences, tried to fit them into a kind of order. There was undoubtedly much suffering, much struggling, but, on the whole, surely there was a balance of happiness--surely order did prevail.

The futility and speciousness of her attempts to recognize a cosmic balance of order and good is emphasized by her own recognition, as she seeks haven in the quotidian through a political discussion with her husband, that "every now and then what she was saying seemed to her oddly empty of meaning<sup>40</sup>."

Woolf weighs Mrs. Thornbury's escape into the illusion of an ordered and benevolent universe against the emergence of an incipient vision in Evelyn Murgatroyd, who throughout the novel has sought a person or philosophy upon which she can shape her life. The others "keep up an elaborate conversation" as a way of deflecting Evelyn's obvious distress over Rachel's death. Evelyn will have none of it: "Why would people never talk about the things that mattered?" Indeed, in true

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<sup>40</sup>Cf. Richard Dalloway, a true politician, who, as he speaks with Rachel "lost consciousness of what he was saying" (68). Such passages imply Woolf's view of the essential unreality of practices and institutions like politics, which nominally are accorded the distinction of manifesting what is "real."

visionary fashion, her questions make the other guests "feel uncomfortable":

"It seems so inexplicable," Evelyn continued. "Death, I mean. Why should she be dead, and not you or I? It was only a fortnight ago that she was with the rest of us. What d'you believe...D'you believe that things go on, that she's still somewhere--or d'you think it's simply a game--we crumble up to nothing when we die? I'm positive Rachel's not dead." (362)

As if in support of her premonition, Rachel's spirit enters Evelyn's consciousness as she packs to return to England: "Suddenly the keen feeling of some one's personality, which things that they have owned or handled sometimes preserves, overcame her; she felt Rachel in the room with her." As the presence fades, Evelyn is left feeling "depressed and fatigued" beneath the burden of a distinctly interrogative consciousness:

What had she done with her life? What future was there before her? What was make-believe, and what was real? Were these proposals and intimacies and adventures real, or was the contentment which she had seen on the faces of Susan and Rachel more real than anything she had ever felt?

Faced with her own imminent proposal of marriage, Evelyn--like Rachel--is unsure of "exactly what I feel." When her suitor tells her that her presence has awakened for him "so many possibilities that I had never dreamed of," we might recall that it was just those possibilities which Rachel had labeled "terrible." And we sense that it is upon this knowledge that Evelyn backs away from the proposal which, prior to Rachel's "visitation", she had been resigned to accepting. Her body

left inviolable, her spirit infused with Rachel's example, Evelyn is left alone pondering her ur-questions: "What did matter then? What was the meaning of it all?"

Like its penultimate chapter, The Voyage Out's final chapter sets forth a tone of cosmic foreboding. A silence and a feeling of "pressure and restraint" permeate the atmosphere of the hotel's dining room as a wind drives "waves of darkness across the earth," prelude to a "great confused ocean of air" which will deposit a brief but powerful storm. We are now clearly among the prisoners of Plato's cave as the guests huddle together in the great hall "far from the windows...(where) they could not see anything." With the storm's passing, a collective "comfortable sense of relief" is experienced; the guests, having faced manifestations of the fragility and contingency of their existences, react by naming the beast, "tell(ing) each other stories about great storms," and thereby distancing themselves from the destructive element of truth.

Now comfortable in their familiar quotidian rhythms, the guests produce pastimes: chess, knitting, and cards--each an emblem of human fate. Their activities and sense of well-being fill the room with an "indescribable stir of life"; their conversation lulls the mind as "the words came gently one after another." It is at this point that St. John Hirst, the novel's personification of reason, returns from Rachel's deathwatch. His cheeks "pale, unshorn and cavernous" from his

glimpse into the abyss, he is in effect returning to the cave to tell the other prisoners of his vision. However, the change in ontological altitude befuddles Hirst, and he "dr(aws) his hand across his eyes as if some dream came between him and the others and prevented him from seeing where he was."

While Hirst is clearly physically and emotionally exhausted, his confusion here signals something beyond fatigue. Unlike Plato's wrathful prisoners whom Socrates speculates would fall upon and murder any of their fellows attempting to disabuse them of their delusion, the movements and voices of these prisoners converge from about the hall to weave a seductive and subtle pattern of order and harmony: Hirst is "content to sit silently watching the pattern build itself up, looking at what he hardly saw." As if to confirm the illusory quality of the pattern, a flash of lightning is revealed to be "only the reflection of the storm which was over," and references to rain, air, earth, and flashing light further emphasize the universal and elemental stakes of the drama being played out in microcosm. The novel closes with Hirst "half-asleep, and vividly conscious of everything around him:

Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed.

Hirst here faces an ontological decision--a choice of how to be--between embracing the implications of his glimpse into

the abyss occasioned by Rachel's apparently arbitrary passing or seeking haven from that vision in the comforting human procession provided by the shadows of his fellow inmates. Much earlier in the novel, after he and Rachel had come from a dance, Hirst observed with characteristic insouciance, "I see through everything--absolutely everything. Life has no more mysteries for me." But the narrative voice undercuts his hubris, observing that "near though they sat, and familiar though they felt, they seemed mere shadows to each other" (169). Now the example of Rachel's life--essentially a leaving of the cave of quotidian being--has transformed her shadowy status into vivid if alarming existential being through the revelation of life's true mystery: the nothingness at its core. Hirst now tentatively reenacts her example; we leave him at the moment of choice and commitment.

Like Hirst's position here, the experience of reading The Voyage Out approximates a kind of test, one which we cannot pass while under the illusion that this is a novel concerned with the vagaries of love. It is indeed a bildungsroman, but the education is ours. If Rachel sees the world differently than do her countrymen, they all inhabit the same world: as Rachel is dead so, too, are they "on their way to bed." Death is our insoluble problem, the ultimate textual puzzle. We live as we read.

CHAPTER V

BECOMING LORD JIM

"...the question is not how to get cured, but how to live."

(Lord Jim)

"My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is before all, to make you see."

(Conrad's Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus)

"He who with eagle's talons graspeth the abyss: he hath courage."

(Nietzsche)

When I perceive Conrad's Jim to be a visionary hero, I recognize his experience to be neither a lust for heroism nor a flight from shame but rather an increasingly profound commitment to what Sartre calls authentic being. Indeed, Olson's gloss of Sartrean "authenticity" as the experience of an individual who "undergoes a radical conversion through anguish and who assumes his freedom; (who) recognizes himself, not as a shepherd of being, but as the cause of there being a world and as the unique source of the world's value and intelligibility<sup>1</sup>" (139) describes the arc of Jim's career as

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<sup>1</sup>In relation to Jim's experience in Patusan, the wording of Olson's gloss might unintentionally raise the specter of imperialism and racism--charges which are hardly unprecedented in Conrad criticism. Humphries, for example, argues that the "real reason (for Jim's going to the East) is to be part of a particular economic system, if not to actually take an active part in its concrete manifestations: the imperialist pillage associated with colonialism." Moreover, Humphries sees, as do I, the genesis of Jim's journey in the "light holiday literature to which he is addicted" (64). While fashionable, this position is untenable. There certainly is no evidence of Jim's "addiction" to romance literature; he, for example, totes a complete Shakespeare with him to Patusan--"Best thing to cheer up a fellow"--along with two unidentified smaller volumes. He does, to be sure, upon Marlow's first visit to Patusan, observe that the Patusanians are "like people in a book" (260). However, Jim's arrival in Patusan is an act of desperation, not one of malignity. It is clear that, following his cowardice upon the Patna, he would have remained in oblivion at any of the posts to which he retreated had not the infamy of his experience ineluctably rooted him out. Indeed, his very entrance into the merchant service in the East is a case of Heideggerian "thrownness": "The majority (of those in the eastern service) were men..., like (Jim), thrown there by some accident" (13). No, the meaning of Jim's Patusan experience yields itself to existential, not Marxist analysis. While Jim's original existential choice to join the eastern service may well have racial undertones in the "distinction of being white," his overriding motive was to "loungue safely through existence" in the grasp of a "safe universe." It is Jim's awakening to the true nature of his world and to his

he evolves through Sartre's fundamental--if nearly opaque--distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself<sup>2</sup>. In sum, Jim, as was his creator, is best defined by his tenacious and--given its seeming futility--courageous pursuit of the question of "how to be." Most importantly, I discover value in my reading of Jim's own crucible of becoming for my own; I realize my self to be among the "us" of Marlow's relentless refrain in Lord Jim<sup>3</sup>. Throughout his fiction, Conrad, who almost certainly never heard the term "existentialism" nor read the writings of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche<sup>4</sup>, reveals an instinctive and cogent existential posture, and, in characters

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responsibilities to himself and to others, not their exploitation, that constitutes the novel's greatness. As Sartre observes, "Total responsibility in total solitude--is not this the very definition of liberty?" For an excellent series of discussions of Conrad in relation to colonialism, see Hamner.

<sup>2</sup>As defined by Hazel Barnes, these are, first, "being-in-itself: non-conscious Being. It is the being of the phenomenon and overflows the knowledge which we have of it. It is a plenitude, and strictly speaking we can say of it only that it is"; and second, "Being-for-itself: The nihilation of Being-in-itself; consciousness conceived as a lack of Being, a desire for being, a relation to being. By bringing Nothingness into the world the For-itself can stand out from being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each For-itself is the nihilation of a particular being" (Nothingness, 800) The key to the distinction is one of consciousness and freedom. Being-in-itself" is the thing--whether man or object-itself; "Being-for-itself" is an evolution or separation from the latter in which the existent chooses a self and experiences the process of becoming that self.

<sup>3</sup>Marlow employs the phrase "one of us" on 10 separate occasions in the novel.

<sup>4</sup>Conrad was deeply read in and influenced by Schopenhauer. See chapter four of Johnson.

like Leggatt; Martin Decoud; Razumov; Kurtz; Marlow and Jim, offers an impressive array of specifically visionary experience. In my final example of the visionary hero, I will focus upon Lord Jim and demonstrate the descent of meaning from what I will outline of Conrad's life, to its thematic reflection in Lord Jim and ultimately the capacity of that representation to affect awareness and change in any reader willing to mentally "audition" the roles offered by this novel, to expose his or her vulnerability to the power of visionary literature.

The inherent difficulty of Sartre's language in attempting to apprehend those modes of being mentioned above might suggest Conrad's own characteristically hazy, often ambiguous--if more felicitous--phraseology<sup>5</sup>. In particular, Conrad's fiction is rife with references to various narrators' inability to see--and consequently to name--events clearly and accurately, and the Marlow of Lord Jim repeatedly laments his inability to see--which is to say, to understand--Jim's character in a definitive way<sup>6</sup>, an ambiguity which persists to--indeed constitutes--the novel's conclusion. But as Bruce Johnson reminds us "it is too easy to smile at either Sartre or Conrad when they have, often for good reason, nearly

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<sup>5</sup>See Adam Gillon's article for an enlightening comparison and contrast between Conrad's and Sartre's thought.

<sup>6</sup>Sartre would see nothing unusual in this, noting that one "cannot pass beyond human subjectivity" ("Existentialism and Humanism," 29).

exhausted the resources of language. There is nothing funny about the ideas involved, and...it appears that at rare moments Conrad is incredibly close to seeing consciousness as this fountain or gland of nothingness" (90). This sentiment is amply borne out in Conrad's letter (translated from the original French) to Ted Sanderson:

There are no converts to ideas of honor, justice, pity, freedom. There are only people who, without knowledge, understanding, or feeling, drive themselves into a frenzy with words, repeat them, shout them out, imagine they believe in them--without believing in anything but profit, personal advantage, satisfied vanity. And words fly away; and nothing remains, do you understand? Absolutely nothing, oh man of faith! Nothing. A moment, a twinkling of an eye, and nothing remains--but a clot of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud cast into black space, rolling around an extinguished sun. Nothing. Neither thought, nor sound, nor soul. Nothing. (Letters, vol.2, p.70)

One of the many instances in Lord Jim where this struggle with the interrelated problems of language and vision<sup>7</sup> is played out occurs at Jim's trial for abandoning the Patna: "...the sound of (Jim's) own truthful statements confirmed his deliberate opinion that speech was of no use to him any longer," and, perceiving Marlow's fixed stare upon him, Jim realizes that Marlow, too, "seemed to be aware of (Jim's) hopeless difficulty" (33). Standing in the witness

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<sup>7</sup>Of course, it could be argued that the entire relationship between Marlow and Jim originates from the fallacy of the "postal principal": that every message finds its recipient. The "yellow cur" incident is the first of a series of occasions in which language proves at best incidental, at worst a hindrance to the growing rapport between the two seamen.

box, Jim understands instinctively that the facts ("Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything<sup>8</sup>") with which the court so assiduously seeks to explain and thereby bury the implications of the Patna affair<sup>9</sup> will prove inadequate to the task.

An understanding of visionary literature teaches us that Jim's frustration here is the result of a way of seeing distinct from that of those who are trying him. Indeed, the Patna inquiry reflects the existence of types or levels of judgment which are endemic to the moral systems which produce them. Jim's solitary stand before the naval inquiry is based upon a systemic ethical view of the world, or what might be termed the fallacy of the morally symmetrical universe. In this instance "right" is defined as conformity to the tacit code of the sea, a "few simple notions" of self-sacrifice, valor, competence and devotion to duty. Any action extraneous to the code is "wrong." Hence Jim's frustration at the

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<sup>8</sup>This same distinction between what I would label the quotidian consciousness's focus on "facts" and the visionary's on instinct and emotion was noted in The Voyage Out. We also see precisely the same concern voiced by Leggatt in "The Secret Sharer":

You don't suppose I am afraid of what can be done to me? Prison or gallows or whatever they may please. But you don't see me coming back to explain such things to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesman, do you? What can they know whether I am guilty or not--or what I am guilty of, either?" (51)

<sup>9</sup>For a graphic illustration of this sentiment, see Marlow's quote on page 214.

inadequacy of facts to explain the subjective and complex reality of his experience. What is lacking in these proceedings is interrogativity, a willingness to question the center or, obversely, to peer into the chaos and ambiguity of life on the margin. It is just Jim's clenched-teeth willingness to view the mess, to persevere through the most grievous doubts that is a prime motivation behind Marlow's unflagging devotion to Jim's ordeal of becoming. And Marlow of all men, having witnessed Kurtz's evisceration of the ideal, knows the danger and cost of ideas: "Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds knocking at the back door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy!" (75).

Jim, then, has perceived--at least instinctively--something essential about the nature of reality that others (witness Brierly) have heretofore suppressed or refused to acknowledge: "These were issues," Marlow later says of Jim's struggle, "beyond the competency of a court of inquiry: it was a subtle and momentous quarrel as to the true essence of life, and did not want a judge" (93). In a phrase that essence is the malevolent soul which lurks at the heart of things, the darkness that underlies the endeavors and fate of humankind, whereas "the facts those men were so eager to know had been visible, tangible, open to the senses, occupying their place

in space and time..." (30). It is as if Jim, enlightened through his plunge into the destructive element, were speaking a language different from that of his inquisitors. Again, Conrad addresses the point in a letter to Cunningham Graham, which reads like a primer on existentialist thought:

The mysteries of the universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart, it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement, you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness and silence. In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement, for virtue, for knowledge, and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men. Life knows us not and we know not life--we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of to-morrow--only the string of my platitudes seems to have no end. As our peasants say: "Pray, brother, forgive me for the love of God." And we don't know what forgiveness is, nor what is love, nor what God is. Assez. (Letters, vol.2, pp. 16-7)

This perception of shifting beliefs, the absence of faith, and the ephemeral nature of human thought begins to explain for us the mystical vagueness characteristic of Conrad's prose. As one critic has observed, Conrad labored under "a withering paradox...that the artist must be engaged in making shapes to prove that shapes cannot be made, in giving form to the formless" (Cox, 11).

At his trial, Jim quells his feelings of "revolt" at the absurdity of trying to capture the meaning of his experience through language, and attempts "through a meticulous precision of statement (to) bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things" (30). This I would suggest to be a key statement of visionary being, and one, given Conrad's propensity for the portentous phrase, that might be easily overlooked. It suggests a kind of double vision that acknowledges the quotidian horror of events--in this case, the "appalling" dishonoring of the "fellowship of the craft" by the Patna's European crew--while insinuating the "true horror," which is exemplified by the recognition that institutionalized ideals like the "brotherhood of the sea" or white European cultural and racial dominance are but psychological fragments shoring up the ruins of futile claims to a teleological universe based upon clearly articulated conceptions of good and evil.

I am not suggesting that Jim is fully conscious of the complexity of such a response here, but Marlow, his personal anthropologist, is. When Marlow fixes his courtroom gaze upon Jim--"an act of intelligent volition" unlike the "fascinated stares" of the others--Jim senses that he "looks at me as though he could see somebody or something past my shoulder" (32-3). I would submit that what Marlow perceives (or, as I will argue later, "reads"), is not the image of himself which the novel's refrain might suggest but rather Nothingness--his

own existential moment--the revelation as illusion of his ideals concerning his craft, his world, his self. As Royal Roussel makes the point, Marlow perceives "the formlessness behind all form, the meaninglessness behind all meaning" (85). Indeed, Marlow says as much in one of his projections of ontological value upon Jim's person:

He was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been; of the sort whose appearance claims the fellowship of these illusions you had thought gone out, extinct, cold, and which, as if rekindled at the approach of another flame, give a flutter deep, deep down somewhere, give a flutter of light...of heat!(128)

To be sure, Marlow's use of "illusions" here possesses a partially ironic cast; one does not normally seek to resuscitate an illusion. But Marlow's prevalent irony is, of course, a defense mechanism against what he sees in the course of his fictional encounters, and the larger point Conrad the artist is making, I think, is that while Marlow's (and Jim's) pursuit of a life sustaining and invigorating ideal of conduct is understandable, it is also futile. That standard can only be discovered individually and through considerable psychic cost; it can never be imposed or adopted from without--however willing the individual might be to accept it--for such an imposed code would lack both value and authenticity.

To know anything of Conrad the man is to understand the profound value he placed on codes of discipline and right conduct. To know anything of existential thought is to know the emptiness of such ideals. "Nowhere is it written," Sartre

observes, "that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is that we are on a plane where there are only men....Therefore, he thinks that man, with no support and no aid, is condemned every moment to invent man" (282). This was a view with which Conrad, for all his longing for a "fixed standard of conduct," did not disagree:

Everyone must walk in the light of his own heart's gospel...No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That's my creed from beginning to end. That's my view of life,--a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas and principles of other people's making. These are a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me" (Jean-Aubry, v.1, 184).

Herein we may better understand Marlow's indelible horror upon discovering the emptiness inhabiting his cherished concepts of the nautical brotherhood. It seems to unleash in him a sense of the apocalyptic. He observes of Jim's experience in the lifeboat: "It is as if the souls of men floating on an abyss and in touch with immensity had been set free for any excess of heroism, absurdity, or abomination," a judgment Jim confirms when he reveals that there was "no concern with anything on earth. Nobody to pass an opinion. Nothing mattered"<sup>10</sup> (120-1). Marlow's shock of recognition is

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Dostoyevsky in The Brothers Karamazov: "If God is dead, then all is permitted." Conrad, by the way, claimed to loathe the Russian author, in part, undoubtedly, because of his family's exile following Russia's usurpation of Poland. But more pointedly, I think, is that Dostoyevsky so powerfully mirrored--and thus anticipated--many of Conrad's own views and themes.

shared with Brierly; together they personify the two frame questions of this study. Jim's actions, Brierly observes, "destroy one's confidence," and no longer able to exist within the cocoon of his illusion<sup>11</sup>, he chooses suicide. Marlow, however, chooses existence, and "takes up" Jim not primarily from altruism but rather from self-preservation: he must discover a new way to be in the awareness of his condemnation to freedom, with Jim ironically as his guide. What neither Brierly nor Marlow understand, however, is that Jim at this point has made no choice; like Martin Decoud, "the dilettante of life," he has simply casually accepted the imposition of a code of conduct to which he has made no commitment beyond throwing in his lot with those identified by "the soft spot, the place of decay, the determination to lounge safely through existence" (12); which is to say he exists within a state of bad faith. In contradistinction, Brierly had believed passionately and without question in the ideal of the craft: "We are trusted," he appeals to Marlow at one point, "Do you understand?--trusted!...We aren't an organized body of men, and the only thing that holds us together is just the name for that kind of decency" (68). The desperation implicit in Brierly's words reflects his perception of the personal consequences of calling his ideal into question. Jim, however, learns to exist in the destructive element of freedom. The

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<sup>11</sup>The entomological metaphor here has particular relevance for Stein's butterflies and thus for the entire evolutionary drama of becoming.

text of Lord Jim is the map of his evolving commitment to an individual code of fidelity to all men and women--his becoming authentic.

But we must go further. It is a critical commonplace that Marlow serves as Conrad's alter ego. We have already seen Conrad, who moved throughout his life among the three languages he spoke fluently, to be grimly aware of the flux and slipperiness of language or with what post-structuralists would label its lack of "referentiality." C.B. Cox reminds us that Conrad's fiction was dug "out of a foreign quarry. This made him doubtful about the mimetic function of words, and in this he is characteristically modern" (8). What was the experience which Conrad's language sought to capture and from which it evolved? Essentially Conrad, living the life of the exile which similarly would come to define twentieth century experience, spent his life staring into a void: first, following the exile of his aristocratic family from Poland, came the bitter years of wandering in the Russian steppes, a time which, in effect, prepared him for the sea years of peering into the fathomless horizon and the bottomless abyss; and finally the writing career, perhaps the most trying of his three lives, with his agonizing slowness of production, the gnawing doubts about recognition, indeed about basic economic survival; always he was tied to his writing desk, pen and paper--his Sisyphean rock--staring into the blankness of the paper, dredging through the years of exile on land, of

isolation at sea, fermenting that loneliness in his imagination to produce the dark vision of his fiction. Peter Glassman speaks of Conrad's character as "framed by virtually no external sanctions" and Frederick Karl speculates that Conrad deliberately--in effect existentially--

...chose directions or careers that would force him to relive a teetering, near-disastrous experience. Comparable to his actual suicide attempt in Marseilles was his use of suicidal situations in which he could confront the worse and could wobble existentially while peering into the abyss. Then, and only then, could he apply himself at his highest level of achievement, whether at mate, captain, or novelist. (18)

Stavrou observes that, like Camus, pessimism and/or nihilism is the bedrock of Conrad's thought. In 1897 Conrad offered the following Kafkaesque cosmology in a letter to Cunningham Graham:

There is a--let us say--a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!--it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider--but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "this is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this--for instance--celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold." Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident--and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is--and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions--and nothing matters.

I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing<sup>12</sup>. (Letters, v.1, p.425)

Art, then, would become for Conrad a hedge against this relentless indifference, a way of imbuing his experience with significant form, of utilizing the nihilistic demons that throughout his life nibbled at the edges of his consciousness. If life's meaning could not be apprehended, its impressions and vicissitudes might nonetheless be recorded. Art became, most powerfully, an exercise in self-definition, for "Joseph Conrad," a name that was the result of nearly twenty permutations, was a self-invention, a persona created out of an urgent ontological need by Josef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski as surely as Jay Gatsby was by James Gatz. Karl compares Conrad to Proteus, "always...in a state of defining and redefining himself. A final shape was not his destiny" (22).

With this background, it is perhaps not surprising that Conrad not only portrayed Camus' philosophical imperative in his art, which contains at least 15 suicides<sup>13</sup>, he also acted upon it. Prior to the start of his literary career, distraught at the drift of his life, despairing at ever resolving a

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. the interrogativity implicit in this passage with that of the passage from Kierkegaard's Repetition quoted in chapter one.

<sup>13</sup>For a listing of Conrad's fictional use of suicide, see Cox, page 6. His opening chapter also offers a lucid meditation on the issues surrounding Conrad's own attempted suicide.

fragmented sense of self, and panic-stricken with guilt and shame over an unpayable gambling debt, the twenty-four-year-old Conrad placed a revolver against his chest and pulled the trigger. Miraculously, the bullet passed through his body without striking a vital organ<sup>14</sup>.

In many ways the act seems an anomaly in the life of a man who was personally circumspect and conservative. However, Karl speculates that Conrad's decision to turn to writing--which, given its own inherent uncertainty and doubtful chances for success, seems itself an act of desperation--was very much a form of gambling and "the endless sheets of white paper he faced each day...a quotidian equivalent of suicide" (175).

What emerges here is a portrait of Conrad as a marginal man. Even late in his life, having achieved mastery in the two quintessential professions of his adopted country--the sea and letters--he continued to not only harbor but be actively tormented by doubts regarding his identity and self-worth, traits--like so much else about Conrad--which mark his prescience for modern experience. It is within this nexus of marginality that Conrad, like Camus, transformed through an

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<sup>14</sup>While there is no minimizing the seriousness of Conrad's action here, all three of his most recent biographers concur that it was more a cry for help than a desire to end his life. For example, the setting of the shooting coincided with an appointment Conrad made with his chief creditor, reflecting, observes Bernard Meyer, "an inner state of indecision, preparing the way for rescue by his tea-time guest in the event his intended self-injury should not prove immediately fatal" (38).

act of consciousness (his writing) an invitation to death into a rule of life.

Lord Jim mirrors that struggle to be, the striving for identity and personal meaning. Even Jim's lack of a surname anticipates the spate of nameless protagonists in twentieth century fiction, many of whom I would label "visionary." That struggle speaks directly, of course, to existentialist thinkers' emphasis upon "becoming." Kierkegaard had argued in Concluding Unscientific Postscript that man is constantly "in a process of becoming" (84), and again in The Sickness Unto Death that "a self, every moment it exists, is in a process of becoming; for the self is not present actually, it is merely what is to come into existence" (60); and Sartre's basic distinction between "existence and "essence" posits that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing...man simply is" ("Existentialism and Humanism," 28). In sum, Kierkegaard and Sartre are arguing that human beings lack a defined, stable self, a view with profound implications for any reading of Lord Jim in that Marlow's narration is fueled by his faith in Jim's intrinsic worth and essential moral fitness<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>Conrad himself echoed similar sentiments in a letter to Edward Garnett:

When once the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless

If Marlow's view is correct, then indeed Jim needs but "another chance," an opportunity that will allow his true nature to emerge; however, our understanding of visionary literature suggests a situation quite distinct from this. Early in the novel, Marlow categorizes the nautical denizens of the East into two distinct groups:

Some, very few and seen there but seldom, led mysterious lives, had preserved an underfaced energy with the temper of buccaneers and the eyes of dreamers. They appeared to live in a crazy maze of plans, hopes, dangers, enterprises, ahead of civilization, in the dark places of the sea, and their death was the only event of their fantastic existence that seemed to have a reasonable certitude of achievement.

The majority were men who, like (Jim), thrown there by some accident, had remained as officers of country ships. They had now a horror of the home service, with its harder conditions, severer view of duty, and the hazard of stormy oceans. They were attuned to the eternal peace of Eastern sky and sea. They loved short passages...and the distinction of being white. They shuddered at the thought of hard work, and led precariously easy lives, always on the verge of dismissal, always on the verge of engagement, serving Chinamen, Arabs, half-castes--would have served the devil himself had he made it easy enough. They talked everlastingly of turns of luck...and in all they

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masquerade of something hopelessly unknown the attainment of serenity is not very far off. Then there remains nothing but the surrender to one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life. And why not? If we are "ever becoming--never being" than I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that; for I know well that I never will be anything. (Letters, I, 267-68)

(I am thankful to Otto Bohlmann's work for alerting me to this passage.)

said--in all their actions, in their looks, in their persons--could be detected the soft spot, the place of decay, the determination to lounge safely through existence. (11-2)

The first grouping--defined by an exclusivity based upon a vision and energy which set its members beyond civilization, dwelling in the destructive element of "mazes" and the sea's "dark places," and sustained only by the promise of death--suggests an approximation of how a quotidian mind might view visionary being. This is buttressed by the distinctly quotidian character of the second group, who, sharing a Heideggerian "throwness," lack either the energy or vision to surge up, leaving their nebulous identities to the vagaries of race and fortune. Most tellingly, their "everlasting" discussions of luck--"how So-and-so got charge of a boat on the coast of China" and so forth--denotes their appalling distance from existential responsibility. Faced with what Kierkegaard terms the "either/or" inherent in any decision, Jim chooses the values of decadence, a decision that leads to his berth aboard the Patna.

It is equally clear, however, that Jim enters into his choice irresponsibly, in a state of "bad faith," seeking, as Marlow puts it, "to lounge safely through existence." Developing a "fascination in the sight of those men," he chooses absorption into the quotidian<sup>16</sup>, refusing, in effect,

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<sup>16</sup> Again, "quotidian" indicates simply one's existential attitude toward experience; in this case, the attitude toward their craft of the men in the East as opposed to that of those in the home service.

to transcend himself or to "surge up" and define himself in differentiation from those around him. Jim's service aboard the Patna is undertaken in what can best be described as an ontological trance<sup>17</sup> or what Sartre would label "being-in-itself." Jim is "penetrated by the great certitude of unbounded safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature...and, as if made audacious by the invincible aspect of the peace, he felt he cared for nothing that could happen to him to the end of his days" (17, 19-20). Jim's blindness at this point gives rise to his characteristic hubris: "At such times his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements. They were the best parts of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality" (20).

At no time in the novel is Jim more blind or less authentic, a fact which is signaled, as so often in visionary literature, by the presence of a figure-ground dichotomy:

There was nothing he could not face. He was so pleased with the idea that he smiled, keeping perfunctorily his eyes ahead; and when he happened to glance back he saw the white streak of the wake drawn as straight by the ship's keel upon the sea as the black line drawn by the pencil upon the chart. (20)

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<sup>17</sup>Conrad's imagery would support this metaphor. Just prior to the collision with the submerged derelict, Jim is repeatedly described as "sleepy" and his blood to have "turned to warm milk." The odious captain arrives on the bridge dressed "in pyjamas and with his sleeping-jacket flung wide open" (21).

Characteristically at this point in his moral evolution, Jim is focused upon the "figure" of the white streak left in the Patna's wake and its "negative," the black line denoting her nautical route, neatly ignoring the implications of the formless "ground" of sea and chart which gives each being. Moreover, the teleology implicit in the straightness of these lines suggests a geographical/ontological illusion based upon the human inability to perceive/see our situation in its totality. Indeed, the very concept of a "chart"--which is but a way of seeing--emblemizes the tenuousness of humankind's grasp of its ontological orientation, a fact soon brought graphically home by the Patna's encounter with the partially submerged and consummately uncharted derelict vessel. And it is that encounter, of course, that will precipitate Jim's literal and deliberate plunge into the destructive element of the sea.

Furthermore, one might well consider the "extraordinary power of defying the shortness of memories and the length of time" of the Patna affair within the context of figure-ground relationships. Marlow observes to his auditors:

It seems to live with a sort of uncanny vitality, in the minds of men, on the tips of their tongues. I've had the questionable pleasure of meeting it often, years afterwards, thousands of miles away, emerging from the remotest possible talk, coming to the surface of the most distant allusions. Has it not turned up to-night between us? And I am the only seaman here. I am the only one to whom it is a memory. And yet it has made its way out! (137-8, emphases mine)

Surely, on the quotidian level, it is the affair's extraordinary circumstances, its seeming to play out a moral drama with apparently clear delineations of right and wrong which define its compulsive presence in the minds of men; but I would contend the Patna episode's true power to be contained in a mythic or visionary dimension, in what Marlow elsewhere labels the "fascination of the abomination"; it allows the darkness underlying our dreams and endeavors to protrude and then escape from our carefully crafted psychic defenses. Jim's growth toward authenticity, responsibility, and freedom, then, is intimately and inextricably tied to his evolving willingness to see or acknowledge and endure that darkness or "ground," the chaotic, shapeless forces that underlie both the macrocosm (the indifferent universe he inhabits) and the microcosm (the primacy of emotion over reason in his own self) of his being.

It is not an easy acknowledgement. Early in his career, Jim, injured in a shipboard accident caused by a storm which "force(d) it upon the mind and the heart of a man, that this complication of accidents or these elemental furies are coming at him with a purpose of malice" lies in his cabin "at the bottom of an abyss of unrest." Shielded from the storm's fury, Jim's awareness of and attitude toward its danger fades, becomes "shadowy." He "saw nothing...and felt secretly glad he had not to go on deck." The visionary works considered thus far teach us that the greater threat Jim faces here is not the

presence of a malevolent universe but rather his refusal to acknowledge its presence. Thus is he alternately gripped by a "rush of anguish" at his ontological lethargy and at the "unintelligent brutality of an existence liable to the agony of such sensations." This is clearly a manifestation of Stein's destructive element ("I tell you, my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough."), a confrontation that fills Jim with "a despairing desire to escape at any cost." When fine weather returns, "He thought no more about it" (11).

The significance here is not simply that Jim's early years are marked by a distaste for acknowledging or grappling with his special demons but rather that that struggle takes place, as it were, off stage, away from the dramatic center of events. This pattern will occur again in the pantomime of the abandonment of the Patna, as Jim stands on the margin of the scene, watching the frantic efforts of his fellow officers to launch a lifeboat, and yet again as Jim removes himself geographically and systematically from Europe, the novel's implicit center of value. The common elements in each of these situations are isolation, loneliness and marginality during which Jim must confront the anguish of his desire to be and even--if we recall the experience of, say, Martin Decoud floating alone in the darkness of the Placid Gulf--whether to be. By contrast, in Marlow's famous interview with the French

lieutenant, the latter observes that while "man is born a coward," habit, necessity and the eyes of others allow one to bear the fear. Jim, Marlow observes, "had none of those inducements" aboard the Patna (147).

Yet is it not during such moments of isolation on the margins of existence that we are capable of seeing ourselves most clearly? And conversely is it not the persistent tug of the quotidian that obviates that vision? Marlow images the French lieutenant as a priest "into whose ears are poured the sins, the suffering, the remorse of peasant generations, on whose faces the placid and simple expression is like a veil thrown over the mystery of pain and distress" (139). As that seaman's heroic wounds testify, he has experienced and borne up under that pain; he has done, as he says, "one's possible." Surely his thirty-two hours aboard an apparently doomed ship would seem to dwarf Jim's experience. And yet does not the French sailor's bulk, lethargy, love of wine, and hint of scandal suggest his own tropism for the center and the emergence of his own desire to lounge safely through existence?

It is on the margin, of course, that creativity thrives, and implicit in the very idea of marginality is interrogativity, a critique of the center. The margin is the region--whether geographic, psychic or artistic--that is most dynamic, most dangerous; at once potentially the most destructive and the most creative venues of human experience.

A similar dichotomy presents itself in Marlow's use of the leitmotif "one of us." As a reference to Jim, it most immediately refers to his membership in the brotherhood of the sea and its tacit rules of conduct, which Jim has abrogated. But like all great literature, Conrad's best work possesses the ability to transcend itself, accruing not just broader dimensions of meaning and complexities of implication, but more importantly a reflexive, mirror-like effect upon the reader wherein he or she comes to recognize the mythic quality of the tale and consequently the ontological share he or she holds in its telling. As the reader's recognition of the universality of Jim's odyssey of becoming matures, the weight of the meaning of the phrase "one of us" falls increasingly on Jim's marginal aspects as a human being caught in a cycle of failure and despair rather than on formal traits such as his appearance or breeding.

Marlow in his struggle to reconcile the promise of Jim's appearance with the seeming perfidy of his actions feels the persistent tug of the center:

...for a second I wished heartily that the only course left open to me was to pay for his funeral. Even the law had done with him. To bury him would have been such an easy kindness! It would have been so much in accordance with the wisdom of life, which consists of putting out of sight all the reminders of our folly, of our weakness, of our mortality; all that makes against our efficiency--the memory of our failures, the hints of our undying fears, the bodies of our dead friends.  
(170)

The key word here is "efficiency," a habit of moral and psychological convenience that allows the inhabitants of the center to, in Ian Watt's phrase, "secure their survival through various unacknowledged mechanisms for hiding and falsifying whatever might disturb their complacent attitude"<sup>18</sup> (316). Captain Brierly is their patron saint. It is precisely Jim's inefficient, even sloppy way of being that shocks Brierly into suicide and pulls Marlow, mesmerized by Jim's resonance for Marlow's own ordeal of becoming that had been played out in "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness," inexorably toward the psychic and geographical margins of experience.

When Brierly rhetorically questions Jim's insistence on facing the Patna inquiry--"Why eat all that dirt?"--he is attempting to secure his own survival through avoiding the interrogativity--the exploration of self--that comes to define both Marlow and Jim. Marlow's refusal to deliver to Jim Brierly's inducement to flee prompts Brierly's ironic complaint, "You don't think enough of what you are supposed to be" (91-2). It is, of course, precisely Marlow's fascination with the question of "how to be" that is a key component of his visionary status: "I wanted to know," he says, aligning himself with Plato, "and to this day I don't know, I can only guess" (101). It is in the persistence and sincerity of Marlow's questioning that we are able to discern Howe's

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. William James and Marlow's own comment: "...it is my belief that no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge" (80).

comment observed in chapter one of the modernists' redefinition of the idea of the question; its metamorphosis from interrogation to "mode of axiomatic value."

The concepts of interrogativity and marginality are inextricably interrelated. What is secure and unquestioned is in the center; yet, as Yeats told us, it is the special burden of the interrogative mode of being to understand the ephemeral nature of that center and to comprehend and confront the destructive element of the beast that the center's demise heralds. This awareness is present in Marlow's growing doubts, "gnawing like a worm," regarding the existence of a "sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct." In effect he is asking whether the stability of the center is not an illusion sustained by the very indifference of those who inhabit it.

This is expressed spatially through the setting of Jim's "confession" to Marlow at the latter's hotel. The meeting occurs in the dining room among a group of world travellers, "people with a-hundred-pounds-round-the-world tickets in their pockets" (99). These are the people Conrad had caustically labeled "idiots," those "just as intelligently receptive of new impressions as their trunks upstairs." As with Marlow's categorization of the sailors plying their craft in the East, we are again meant to infer an ontological distinction between those concerned with the foggy adumbrations of the "Jim problem" (that is, Marlow and those "of us" both within and

without Lord Jim caught up in Marlow's "text") and those concerned with the extent to which they've been "done" at the local bizarre. While such distinctions are facile and patently unfair, Conrad is intent here on emphasizing the types of questions we allow to torment us. When Jim in the naivete of his solipsism blurts out "hell" in description of the ordeal of the inquiry, the other diners look up in "alarm from their iced pudding," and Marlow realizes the interview must be moved to an adjoining gallery. It is here on the physical margin of the setting, where "the night seemed to hang like a splendid drapery," serving as backdrop to Jim's Patna past ("the riding lights of ships winked afar like setting stars") and his Patusan future ("the hills across the roadstead resembled rounded black masses of arrested thunderclouds") that Jim actually narrates his desertion, going "through it again while he was telling (Marlow) these things he could not tell the court" (86).

And again, following Jim's sentencing, Marlow, out of "a sense of responsibility," takes Jim back to his room: "On all the round earth...he had no place where he...could withdraw--be alone with his loneliness." Here Marlow oversees Jim's metaphysical struggle with the question of "whether to be." However, even the isolation of Marlow's ascetic room proves inadequate to Jim's torments of conscience as, his body racked by convulsive shudders, he bursts through the glass doors that lead to a veranda. Again Jim's growing marginality--and

therein his growing sense of self--is emphasized through Marlow's juxtaposition of the "feeble burst of many voices" emanating from the community dining room below with the depth of Jim's commitment to face the destructive element of his emotional despair. It is in this posture--with Jim "on the brink of a vast obscurity," and the light from Marlow's candle falling faintly on Jim's back--that Marlow says he "(wi)ll always remember" what I would term the iconic Jim, who stands as a paradigm of the individual's evolution toward authenticity. While it may seem at the very least ironic that the plot does not in fact turn on the Patna incident, an event with the power of apparently universal fascination, but rather here in the silences and shadows of Marlow's room, Conrad is once again demonstrating both his prescience in anticipating literature's movement inward, its ability to achieve communication through "an interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment" (Iser, 169) and his instinctively existential outlook. For when Jim reemerges from the veranda and intones "That's done," he is signaling his readiness to "take possession of himself...to mould himself in his own image" (Macquarrie, 74). Unamuno tells us that "we live in memory, and our spiritual life is at bottom simply the effort of our memory to persist, to transform itself into hope, the effort of our past to transform itself into our future" (9). This transformation and creation occur on Marlow's veranda, an event so "marginal"

that even Marlow cannot actually witness it, and yet its results form the kernel of Jim's growth toward authentic being.

The ideas of marginality and interrogativity may be profitably extended to the reader, too, through his or her interaction with the literal margin of the book. The blank areas of the printed page are, like the white areas of Jim's Patna sea chart, the terra incognita of the intellectual map and the locus of the reader's most personal and intuitively critical engagement with the page's center, its words, which denote a certain "course" that the reader may follow passively or question actively<sup>19</sup>. Marginalia mark the merging of reader and text, the interaction of which produces, in Iser's model of the reader's interaction with the author's text, the possibility of textual meaning; here, I would suggest, it marks the possibility of meaning beyond the literary work. When the reader inscribes the page's margin, its blankness, she or he is acting in similar ways: first, as a palpable sign of commitment to and engagement with the problem and experience of the work--what Conrad would term "fidelity." Where the first-time reader of Lord Jim might well exhibit distress or frustration that 350 pages of narrative, opinion, and rumination on the phenomenon of Jim concludes with "who knows?", what images of Sisyphean labor are conjured up by

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<sup>19</sup>Iser argues that the author's text "represents a pattern, a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader" (9).

those of us, aware of this (non)conclusion, who nonetheless return repeatedly to this or any book, our journey delineated by the increasing density of our marginalia<sup>20</sup>? The very decision to read literature as a way of living as opposed to a way of making a living<sup>21</sup> serves as a microcosm for the profound existential implications of how we fulfill ourselves as individuals. For it is only through its depth or intensity rather than its breadth that the reading experience or any other experience fulfills one. To engage oneself with a work or author is to some extent to deny the possibility of experiencing others, textually or personally. Again fidelity is the operative term. "Every decision is a decision against as well as a decision for; and every decision limits the range of possibilities that will be open for future decisions" (Macquarrie, 182).

Second, marginalia are a sign of the reader's questioning struggle toward meaning and of a desire to counter the resistance of the black marks at the center of the page by

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<sup>20</sup>Iser reminds us that eighteenth century authors frequently utilized the metaphor of the journey to educate their readers to the rigors of apprehending longer genres like the novel. The reader--like the traveller--"combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey" (16). This recalls for us, of course, the necessity of multiple readings in trying to divine the "pattern" of any complex literary work.

<sup>21</sup>While I am not suggesting these two ways of relating to texts to be mutually exclusive, I do maintain, as stated in my first chapter, that the former often becomes lost in the professional shuffle of the latter.

connecting the self with them through the literal and intellectual touching of the reader's words with the author's. In essence, the margin becomes, like Sisyphus' rock, the reader's "thing" through which the possibility of meaning is derived through repeated--if never wholly successful--readings. When that text is "visionary" in nature, the choice reflects Marlow's commitment to the enigma of Jim: "There was nothing but myself between him and the dark ocean. I had a sense of responsibility" (170-71); that is, the choice of visionary texts as objects of engagement signal the reader's commitment to the existential process of becoming just as the act of inscribing the book's margins reflects his or her passion for, questioning of and possible identification with the possible ethical roles offered by the work. Marginalia, then, function in two opposite ways: simultaneously connecting the reader with the page's center but also, more significantly, nudging him or her "over the edge" of the page and into a being-in-the-world renewed and intensified by the paradigms offered by visionary heroes. The reader's experience of writing and "being" in the margins of Lord Jim is consonant with, as mentioned above, Conrad's lifelong struggle to inscribe meaning upon a universe he viewed as "a mystery play...with an obscure beginning and an unfathomable denouement: (Karl, 651).

A book itself is a "figure," a human structure created to encompass and give significant form and meaning to the chaotic

"ground" of experience. Fiction orders that experience and presents it for our inspection and, I believe, our judgment. From its opening paragraph where Conrad employs the second person in his narration, Lord Jim seeks to draw the reader into a position of moral participant; it seeks to force choices upon us. It was not until my third or fourth reading of the novel that the familiar phrase "one of us" brought me up short with the force of "You hypocrite lecteur, mon semblé, mon frère," transforming the rules of my engagement with the book. It became no longer Jim's relationship with his craft that was my concern, nor even Marlow's to Jim, but rather, more affectively and dangerously, mine to Jim and Marlow and Conrad; and, by extension, to the men and women I would encounter beyond the margins of this book; suddenly I become part of "us."

This conversion is underlined through Jim's repeated question to Marlow: "What would you do?" (pp. 102, 111, 121, 130, 132, 138). The baldness of the phrase, like so much else about Jim's character, smacks of an adolescent naivete<sup>22</sup>, suggesting the manner in which a high school sophomore might expeditiously conclude an essay. But again an awareness of the nature of visionary literature reminds us that this is, in fact, an *ur* question that, like the refrain "one of us,"

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<sup>22</sup>The child-like qualities of visionaries like Jim, Rachel Vinrace, Bartleby, and Miss Lonelyhearts speak to their separateness from quotidian cynicism. Their innocence is simultaneously compelling and threatening to those around them; their prototype is Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin.

serves through its very repetition to confront us with the novel's ethical and existential choices. And implicit in the idea of choice is that of action. Like the visionary hero, do something we must--even in the face of the probable futility of those actions. Indeed, much of the world's greatest literature seeks to subvert meaning; it beckons us, too, to jump ship. A novel like Lord Jim with its complex narrative scheme<sup>23</sup>, ambiguity of character, rudely bifurcated structure and refusal to "pay off" with easy truths and neat denouements continually encourages the "average pilgrim" (68) to abandon the work, to turn to more passive pursuits, to tasks more promising of immediate and tangible reward. In this way, too, the reading experience mirrors life. Ford Madox Ford observed that his artistic collaboration with Conrad was based upon the aesthetic principle "that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind" (Watt, 209). Therefore we have effects like the subversion of linear progression in the revelation of Jim's character (who among our acquaintances have revealed their stories to us linearally?) and, more significantly, the presentation to the reader of a series of moral choices.

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<sup>23</sup>Beach offers a graphic rendering of the convolutions of Lord Jim's narrative scheme. Assuming a linear chronology of the novel's events as denoted by an A, B, C, D, etc. progression, the book's actual chronology reads, by chapters: KLMP, WA, E,B, E, E, H, GD, HJ, FE, E, E, F, F, F, FK, I, I, R, I, KL, MN, N. Q. QPO, OP, P, QP, P, P, P, QP, P, P, Q, Q, Q, R, ZV, YX, S, S, S, S, TY, U, U, U, WXY. (363)

The most affecting of these, I believe, occurs at the conclusion of chapter 11. Jim has revealed to Marlow his confrontation with and rejection of suicide following his leap from the Patna: While he felt "sick of life," he understands that "that was not the way. I believe--I believe it would have--it would have ended--nothing." Jim then abruptly and characteristically turns on his auditor (among whom we have been prepared to number ourselves), asking with violent emotion: "What do you believe?" Again, the question Jim asks is "whether to be," whether he should have committed suicide. While the question forces the engaged reader into conscious moral participation in the analysis of Camus' philosophical question, even more instructive is Marlow's reaction to Jim's decidedly unrheterical query:

A pause ensued, and suddenly I felt myself overcome by a profound and hopeless fatigue, as though his voice had startled me out of a dream of wandering through empty spaces whose immensity had harassed my soul and exhausted my body.

The passage possesses the signature Conradian note: doomladen and complex. Marlow's image of wandering heart and soul sick amidst a vast immensity (Ford would employ similar imagery in The Good Soldier) has implications existentially and for the related themes of marginality and nothingness. Indeed the word "nothing" reverberates throughout this and the ensuing passage, in the process accruing something of its transformational power in another visionary novel, A Passage to India.

The complexity of the present passage manifests itself in several ways: first, the subtle transition into simile of Marlow's "dream" here recalls both Jim's condition when the Patna struck the submerged derelict ship and of the potential condition of the Patna's pilgrims, who, if Jim had chosen to rouse them to the ship's condition, would have "leap(t) out of sleep into terror" (105). In so doing, it reinforces the novel's frequent distinctions between levels of consciousness or being. Secondly, the weltschmerz Marlow expresses is triggered grammatically by Jim's question, "What do you believe?" By implication it establishes action as the antidote to the angst of Marlow's image of wandering through an immensity of empty spaces. While a cursory reading might suggest that weariness to result from the enigma of Jim, it in fact results from Marlow's heretofore avoidance of just the questions Jim is forcing upon him; that is, Jim's question "startle(d Marlow) out of dream" he had already inhabited. The axis of this key passage, though, is the "pause," the interval of silence which suggests both Marlow's reflection upon the implications of Jim's question and the ontological gulf which separates individuals. It is during this chronological/psychic Iserian "gap," instigated by Jim's question, that Marlow confronts his enervating passivity and consequently the necessity of choice.

In essence, Marlow is attempting to "read" Jim much as we are. Marlow, who never answers Jim's question, observes at the beginning of chapter twelve:

The mist of his feelings shifted between us, as if disturbed by his struggles, and in the rifts of the immaterial veil he would appear to my staring eyes distinct of form and pregnant with vague appeal like a symbolic figure in a picture<sup>24</sup>.

While the "mist" emphasizes the inherent isolation of each character, the attempt of Marlow's "staring eyes" to divine the meaning of Jim as symbol reflects the reader's own experience of the text. Marlow finally breaks the silence by intoning "I see," but "more," he claims, "to prove to myself that I could break my state of numbness than for any other reason." The point I would wish to make here is that Marlow can break his condition of "numbness" only through "seeing," which is to say, understanding Jim's odyssey of becoming. And like the novel's emphasis upon the creative possibilities to be realized in the margins of existence, that understanding emerges in the silences between the words where empathy and compassion reign.

The passage also illustrates Morson's theory of "Prosaics" mentioned in chapter one, which "privileges" the novel over poetry as offering a special way of thinking about the world before our eyes and about the ethical problems we

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<sup>24</sup>Cf. the "film" that obscures Racel Vinrace's vision, p. 163.

constantly face" (527). It is only in novels that we can discover:

...descriptions of situations rich enough to educate our moral sense...that offer a rich sense of the psychological and moral milieu of living people....The entire impulse is to provide just such information, as "thickly" as possible. Ethics is a matter of prosaics, and great prose develops our ethical sense....In novels we see moral decisions made moment by moment by inexhaustibly complex characters in unrepeatable social situations at particular historical times; and we see that the value of these decisions cannot be abstracted from these specifics. (526)

When the naive reader (if such exists) chooses to read Lord Jim, he or she is ostensibly opting for a romance, a tale of high adventure, large deeds and exotic setting. Such is the focus of the world. "Most philosophers and historians tend to focus on big events...and individual people tend to tell themselves the story of their lives in terms of exceptional events and big decisions." One is reminded again of Beckett's observation that "all life is figure and ground." And indeed, Jim's existence seems swallowed up by the few hours the Patna incident takes to play itself out, an absorption imaged by "the shadow of a silent cloud (that) had fallen upon the ship from the zenith, and seemed to have extinguished every sound of her teeming life" (105).

Yet I am suggesting that visionary fictions subvert any expectation of meaning being discovered in the events which typically form the foreground of experience and find it instead in the paradoxical isolation and interaction of reading, often in the form of letters--the most personal of

human documents and the genre which offered both form and credibility to the earliest English novels: Miss Lonelyhearts hunched over the train of human misery represented in his correspondents' letters; Seeger's shock of recognition as he reads his father's letter; Bartleby's despair generated almost by osmosis in the Washington dead-letter office, perhaps the most marginal of venues; and in the more traditional "texts" pursued by Rachel Vinrace in her shipboard cabin, South American room and even its wilderness; and finally Jim, the genesis of whose entire odyssey lies in his pursuit of "a course of light holiday literature" (5). In this light, Morson asks a question rooted in the distinction between center and margin, and rooted, too, in the power of questions to change the way we think and consequently live: "But what if the important events are not the great ones, but the infinitely numerous and apparently inconsequential ordinary ones, which, taken together, are far more effective and significant?" (519). The center of Lord Jim is not truly to be discovered in the Patna incident nor in Jim's martial exploits in Patusan, but rather in the awkward, intensely intimate moments Jim and Marlow spend together sorting out Jim's experience or in the equally mundane decisions Jim makes in presiding over the quotidian affairs of the Malayans. This is where he "surges up" in the world, where he takes his most significant steps toward authenticity, and where the book truly lives. "Art," Tolstoy observed, "begins where the tiny bit begins." So in

that brief pause as he sits on the physical and psychic margin, having been confronted by Jim's raw question, Marlow experiences a subtle readjustment, an interrogation of self. There is moral movement.

Ultimately it is Marlow more than Jim who is our visionary model for it his task to read, perceive and comprehend Jim's experience. And Marlow proves a cogent reader. Drawing upon the work of R.D. Laing, Iser tells us that "all men are invisible to each other. Experience is man's invisibility to man" (165). This is an insight Marlow instinctively shares:

I at least had no illusions; but it was I, too, who a moment ago had been so sure of the power of words, and now was afraid to speak, in the same way one dares not move for fear of losing a slippery hold. It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence; the envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before the outstretched hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp. (180)

Communication between individuals and between readers and texts, Iser argues, results from individuals' efforts to fill in these existential "gaps" or "blanks" or "indeterminacies" with others or with the silence of the text. And again, Marlow shows himself a competent reader: "...but I would have been little fitted for the reception of (Jim's) confidences had I not been able at times to understand the pauses between words"

(105). Iser points out that because "we have no experience of how other experience us" our understanding of one another results from "interpretation." Thus does Marlow "read" Jim.

Marlow's (and the reader's) exegesis of Jim's character is aided by a series of "reflectors" whom he encounters in the pursuit of his "text." The character of Brierly represents an obvious example, his suicide offering a radical example of the individual's failure to attain being-for-itself. Arguably the most central reflector is the French lieutenant, who evokes in Marlow perhaps the book's most cogent existential moment with the commonplace remark "how the time passes." Marlow labels his experience "a moment of vision," but while its mundane catalyst is similar to those generating Joycean epiphanies, the visionary nature of Marlow's experience is evident in its emphasis upon quotidian blindness, not insight:

It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it's just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome. Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much--everything--in a flash--before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence. (143)

Marlow's existential moment allows him to perceive the Frenchman as indeed "left...hopelessly behind with a few poor gifts." Those gifts, it is made clear, are heroic in nature, "the raw material of great reputations," but most significantly, I feel, they hint at Jim's own experience: following his youthful shipboard accident, he, too, had been

"left behind," (11) his persistent lameness portending the Frenchman's own heroic scars. Indeed, at one point in the recitation of his part in the Patna affair, the lieutenant turns to Marlow and sounds Jim's leitmotif, "What would you (do)" (140)? Clearly, he is intended to reflect what Jim may become through the passage of time.

Similarly, the vignette of Bob Stanton (pp. 149-51) functions only to mirror Jim's experience. Jim's situation as a water-clerk is, Marlow observes, surpassed in its aridity only by the position of an "insurance canvasser" a career which Stanton briefly endured. It is Stanton, of course, who later dies because he will not abandon a passenger paralyzed by fright at their ship's impending sinking. But we as readers recall, too, that in Lord Jim's narrative scheme, we have just been told by the French lieutenant of the role of "the eye(s) of others" that allows individuals to bear the horror of experience, and we know, also, that, unlike Jim, the eyes of Stanton's shipmates were riveted upon him throughout his ordeal.

While Marlow does not dwell upon the perhaps too obvious parallels of these situations, the fact that he includes them in his narrative at all attests to the importance of his continuous process of ethical weighing and balancing, aided by the parade of "reflectors" he encounters. Textually this is continued in short order with the appearance of Chester (pp.161-69), who ironically announces himself to Marlow with

"Man overboard!" Chester, whom Marlow later characterizes as a "strange idealist" (172), asseverates the need to "see things exactly as they are--if you don't, you may as well give in at once. You will never do anything in this world." Chester's vision, not accidentally, is of a literal world of shit, a guano island upon which he seeks to place Jim, who, with two six-shooters, would be "supreme boss" over forty "coolies." The scheme, of course, is meant to represent a variant foreshadowing of Jim's Patusan period, another way he can possibly become, and evokes in Marlow a complementary existential, even Promethean, image:

I had a rapid vision of Jim perched on a shadowless rock, up to his knees in guano, with the screams of sea-birds in his ears, the incandescent ball of the sun above his head; the empty sky and the empty ocean all a-quiver, simmering together in the heat as far the eye could reach.

Accompanying Chester is Captain Robinson, "an emaciated patriarch in a suit of white drill." Jim, too, we recall, was dressed in white in Marlow's initial description; moreover, there exists the air of scandal and infamy around "Holy-Terror" Robinson. Nonetheless, charges of cannibalism following a shipwreck leave Robinson undeterred:

Three weeks after (rescue) he was as well as ever. He didn't allow any fuss that was made on shore to upset him; he just shut his lips tight, and let people screech. It was bad enough to have lost his ship, and all he was worth besides, without paying attention to the hard names they called him.

Robinson, then, would appear to balance in Marlow's and the reader's minds Bob Stanton's "way of being"; one simply exists

in a condition of moral solipsism refusing, in Brierly's phrase, "to eat all that dirt." However, herein an essential distinction lies. To be sure, as Marlow says of Jim's case, "a little coarser nature would not have borne the strain; it would have had to come to terms with itself--with a sigh, with a grunt, or even with a guffaw; a still coarser one would have remained invulnerably ignorant and completely uninteresting" (177). While Robinson clearly falls into the latter category, we are reminded that the existentialists argue repeatedly for the importance of the individual's escaping the constraints of the "they," the crowd, who would seek to drag the existent back into the grasp of quotidian moral lethargy. "Existenz," Jaspers observes, "warns me to detach myself from the world lest I become its prey" (2:5). The case of Robinson--and Chester for that matter--is a quite different matter in that their disdain for the world is rooted in a desire to appropriate others as objects (in Robinson's case in a particularly grisly manner). Chester and Robinson's venture to the guano island is a case of sordid manipulation and material lust profoundly dissimilar to Jim's existential need to discover a place "where he could have it out with himself without being bothered by the rest of the universe" (171).

It is this defining habit of conscience and moral introspection which sustains Jim's quest for authentic selfhood. Patusan is the setting and realization of that quest

and is framed by yet two other reflectors, Stein and Gentleman Brown.

Gripped by political anarchy and suffused by the ubiquitous threat of violence and death, Patusan possesses in its sheer alienness to Jim's experience the potential to become for him another world of shit, but as Sartre teaches us in works like "The Wall" and No Exit, the coward may transform himself into a hero; we are what we make of ourselves. It is in Patusan, then, that Jim attains authenticity by a sheer act of will.

It might be argued that Jim's Patusan experience is another instance of Heideggerian "thrownness"; indeed, Stein states that "a man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea" (214). In fact, however, Jim grasps with avidity Patusan's potential for reinventing himself: "He left his earthly failings behind him and that sort of reputation he had, and there was a totally new set of conditions for his imaginative faculty to work upon" (218). Its very alienness and danger--Marlow observes that if Stein "had arranged to send him to a star of the fifth magnitude that change could not have been greater"--reify the "destructive element" posited by Stein as humankind's only salvation in a world where they are "not wanted, where there is no place for (them)" (208).

Stein's pronouncement of humankind's essential alienation is curious for he suggests, I feel, a theistic pole opposed to

Gentleman Brown's atheism. Stein's "intense, almost passionate absorption" with butterflies<sup>25</sup> is conducted with a concentration of vision which intimates a Paleyan argument from design:

...he looked at a butterfly as though on the brown sheen of those frail wings, in the white tracings, in the gorgeous markings, he could see other things, an image of something as perishable and defying destruction as these delicate and lifeless tissues displaying a splendour unmarred by death. (207)

In addition, while his rapid and incisive "diagnosis" of Jim's problem as romanticism further marks him as a master "reader," Stein's Camusian prescription of suicide as the sole remedy to the human condition--"One thing alone can us from being ourselves cure!' The finger came down on the desk with a smart rap"--and his summation of our condemnation to freedom by the arch-ur question "how to be" mark him as the novel's prime existential voice.

If Stein has discovered meaning in his existence, it has emerged through a process of becoming abetted by reflection. While Marlow characterizes him as "one of the most trustworthy men I have ever known" (202), Stein understands fully the price of that attainment: "And do you know how many opportunities I let escape; how many dreams I had lost that had come in my way" (217)? Thus, while Marlow imbues Stein's character with a certain ontological inevitability--"I saw

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<sup>25</sup>The butterfly, of course, is an ancient symbol for the human soul and, as mentioned above, also carries resonance for Jim's metamorphic project of authenticity.

only the reality of his destiny, which he had known how to follow with unfaltering footsteps"--the committed reader's repeated encounters with Jim's reflectors has taught him to perceive Stein as another<sup>26</sup> possible way for Jim to be.

Stein's own awareness of the precariousness of existence is symbolized in his pursuit of entomology: he collects not only butterflies but also beetles. From a human perspective those species may be seen to reflect the authentic and inauthentic, the evolutionary and the stagnant. Stein's fascination with them functions as a kind of memento mori, a reminder of the cost and implications of his finally being able to pronounce, "I exist, too" (217). The "beetleness" of humanity is personified in Jim's final reflector, Gentleman Brown.

The figures of Brown and Cornelius, who dog and ultimately destroy Jim, suggest a remanifestation of Chester and Robinson in the same way that their guano island prefigured the destructive element of Patusan. It is as if in his use of reflectors Conrad were offering a series of quizzes

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. Stein with Siegmund Yucker (pp. 198-99), in whose employ Jim briefly pursues his existence as a water clerk. Yucker may be seen to foreshadow Stein in that Yucker and Marlow discuss the possibility of sending Jim into the interior to tend the Yucker Brothers "concessions," a plan obviated by Jim's "secret" Patna past again reemerging. Nonetheless, Conrad's rhetorical strategy appears to be to create positive and negative "reflections" of characters as if to emphasize the centrality of the human struggle--and frequent failure--to achieve authenticity.

or problems<sup>27</sup> on certain ontological principles, changing only the problems' components. Indeed, when we see this--that is, when we understand Lord Jim as visionary in genre--we actualize Iser's comment that "as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (21).

That Conrad's stated aim was not only to make us "see" but also to depict the drama of authenticity is further reflected in the seeming awkwardness of Lord Jim's Patna/Patusan structure. It will be recalled that the genesis of Jim's pursuit of heroism lay in "a course of light holiday literature" (5). But as I hope has been demonstrated, that quest was marked by "bad faith"; Jim never committed himself to the ideals and roles offered by those texts but rather merely assumed a casual pose that proved woefully inadequate to the actual rigors of existence. His leap from the Patna is an act of indecision, which remains for Jim unresolved even in retrospect: "I jumped--it seems."

In Patusan, however, Jim discovers what Kierkegaard called an "idea for which I can live and die" (Journals, 15). Nor has his early reading been in vain for he observes that the Patusanians "are like people in a book" (260). What has changed is Jim's vision of his being-in-the-world and of his

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<sup>27</sup>The reader will recall mention in chapter two of Ignatius' "Spiritual Exercises."

being-with-others: "It seemed to come to me," he tells Marlow. "All at once I saw what I had to do" (261). Jim's vision is of a way to relieve the internecine warfare that has dissipated Patusan, a plan for which "he had made himself responsible for success on his own head" (263). Most significantly, Jim's commitment and sense of personal responsibility imbue him with "the gift of finding a special meaning in everything that happened to him" (305).

Jim's ultimate manifestation of that responsibility before the chieftain Doramin following Gentleman Brown's savage ambush is the culmination of a process that began with Jim's resolve to stand before his nautical tribunal; that is, one's authenticity results not from an existential moment, which can only reveal one's situation in the world, but rather through a psychological, spiritual and, as we saw in "Act of Faith" and again in Lord Jim, even physical odyssey. It persists here through what Marlow terms Jim's "retreat" through various Eastern ports of call, turns on Jim's "leap of (good) faith" from the Rajah's compound and concludes with his "proud and unflinching glance" in the face of his own death. Beyond the love of his wife and the unquestioning devotion of Tamb' Itam--not inconsiderable gifts--Jim, once again, is left with nothing beyond his hard-earned sense of self, his authenticity.

Jim serves the reader as a paradigm of becoming, not necessarily as a way, specifically, to be. That is a decision

we must each make alone, abetted, ideally, by a plethora of "texts," both literary and human. As Booth says, "If I do not practice courage frequently enough to make it habitual, how can I ever become courageous?" (253). Jim's manifest failure aboard the Patna is the sign of his humanity, marking his common cause with Adam and Eve, who, like Jim, were "not good enough" and were also subsequently dissuaded by the forces of darkness from fidelity to a sacred code. As for them, the question for Jim becomes how to live in a hostile world outside the bounds of romance. This question becomes Jim's rock, which he chooses to embrace and push toward the summit. It is a task, undoubtedly, as arduous, harrowing and fraught with the likelihood of failure as the dragging of the cannons to the peak of Doramin's mountain. Yet like Camus's Sisyphus, "this universe without a master (must have finally seemed) to Jim neither sterile nor futile....The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (91). We must imagine Jim happy.

### Coda

In his essay on the novel in Fiction and Repetition, J. Hillis Miller does not view Lord Jim as a source of ontological strategies but instead as a work that fails to provide its reader with a definite answer to whatever question it raises. Miller seems virtually obsessed with the idea of a literary work's offering an unequivocal, "visible thematic or structuring principle which will allow the reader to find out its secret, explicate it once and for all, untie all its knots and straighten all its threads" (25). In reviewing the book's numerous reflections and resonances, he complains that "no episode serves as the point of origin, the arch-example of the mythos of the novel" (33-4); nor does the literary sleuthing of critics like Sherry and Watt "serve as a solid and unequivocal point of origin by means of which the novel may be viewed, measured, and understood" (37); nor do its image patterns offer "a last place where an unambiguous meaning may be found" (37). From this Miller asseverates: "I claim, then, that from whatever angle it is approached Lord Jim is a work which raises questions rather than answers them" (39). We have, of course, heard this before. The words are--essentially--those of Irving Howe quoted above, and the principle is the interrogativity which defines modernity and is endemic to visionary fictions.

As a deconstructionist, Miller documents on the one hand the "undecidability" of Lord Jim's multiple viewpoints; on the

other, he refuses to distinguish among them. Is Chester's determination to "see things as they are" motivated by the same ethical values as the equally unencumbered vision of the French lieutenant? Is Gentleman Brown but another version of Jim stripped of Jim's reassuring physical form? Now admittedly, Miller's point may be that there is nothing either within or beyond the "text" upon which we can definitively discern the answers to these questions, and he would be right. The supreme irony is that--like Jim's guilt--Miller's deconstructive objections and observations are manifest and unquestionable--and finally quite beside the point.

During his final meeting with Jim, Marlow speaks alone to Jim's wife, Jewel, who tells of her mother's death after a lifetime of abuse and degradation at the hands of the scrofulous Cornelius. The tale, Marlow relates,

...had the power to drive me out of my conception of existence, out of the shelter each of us makes for himself to creep under in moments of danger, as a tortoise withdraws within its shell. For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive. But still--it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must--don't you know?--though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge. (313)

Marlow's existential moment harbors the answers to Miller's contention of the "undecidability" of Lord Jim or of any other text. Marlow's "second or two beyond the pale" in which he

loses "all (his) words" is in essence and function another Iserian "gap," the moment constitutive of meaning in which the words (or text) that he has heard (Jewel's story) and the consciousness with which he seeks to interpret those words interact. In Iser's model it is the dynamic of these two forces (the "artistic" or textual pole and the "aesthetic" pole, the "realization accomplished by the reader" [21]) which produces the synthesis of meaning. But always this process is aided by the reader's filling of textual "gaps," the information which the silent text does not nor can not yield. This textual silence mimics the cosmic silence against which the visionary hero seeks to define him or herself in the same way that Iser's conception of the "implied reader" (clearly an addendum to Booth's "implied author") relates to my own suggestion of the committed reader who will not only perceive textual patterns and structure but also act upon that vision beyond the text.

Indeed, the figure-ground dichotomies which have appeared so prominently in visionary fictions are equally important in Iser's theory of reading. For Iser, a text can never be grasped wholly but only as "a series of changing viewpoints, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives. This is the process by which the reader realizes an overall situation" (68). The relevancy of this conception for the "reflectors" operating in Lord Jim would seem clear. Moreover, these viewpoints are alternately thrust into what

Iser calls the "foreground and background" or "theme and horizon." It is through the reader's continual acts of comparison and contrast among these views (always abetted by gap-filling) that meaning is produced.

Readers exist in the silence of gaps more than we ever can in our processing of a text's words. I am reminded of Kierkegaard's observation in Fear and Trembling that Abraham's true trial and his greatest courage were not manifested in the beginning of the downward sweep of his dagger toward Issac's throat but instead during the three day's journey to Mount Moriah which preceded that aborted act when he lived in silence with the imminence of his task permeating his mind, all the while attending to the quotidian tasks that, absurdly, sustained the life he was committed to end. Abraham, of course, was himself sustained by his faith, which, in effect, filled up the terrible silence and the emptiness of his fate with a vision of God: "He believed the ridiculous" (54).

It is perhaps equally ridiculous to believe that anyone's engagement with literature will effect a more moral, or meaningful, or happy existence. Kierkegaard speculates that had Abraham lacked faith, he would have done something else--something equally great, but different--and pictures him plunging his knife into his own breast. In this way, Kierkegaard writes, "he would have been admired in the world and his name never forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, another to be a guiding star that saves the

anguished" (54). Visionary fictions are guides on our own anguished journeys toward selfhood; they aid us in the hard task of becoming by presenting us with codes toward which we can act with fidelity or, if the journey should appear too arduous or its destination doubtful, with cynicism. As Kierkegaard unquestionably found in his contemplation of the Abraham legend, the choice we make reminds us of why art and its criticism are important.

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## APPENDIX

The use of a figure-ground dichotomy is found at the very center of Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel" (1899), a story that anticipates later visionary fictions and whose structure is designed, like theirs, to virtually ambush the reader into self-awareness. The figure of the Palace Hotel, we are told in the opening line, takes its distinctive color from "the legs of a kind of heron, (which) causes the bird to declare its position against any background" (104). Indeed, the immediate background we are given is a singularly hostile one--a blizzard described as "a turmoiling sea of snow"--against whose fury the hotel's inner sanctum, described in religious imagery, remains unaffected: "No island of the sea could be exempt in the degree of this little room with its humming stove" (106). That this blithe sanctuary of the story's five main characters seems to ineluctably disintegrate into a brutal fistfight, a cold-hearted ostracism, and a vicious murder is perhaps not surprising. The assiduously observed code of conduct which sustains the hotel's veneer of civility is increasingly revealed as an ineffectual, even desperate maneuver against the implacable and indifferent chaos inherent in human and physical nature.

However, the rhetorical ante is raised in the denouement of "The Blue Hotel" in a way it is not, say, in "The Lottery" (1949), which also addresses the theme of human kind's

atavistic nature. In Shirley Jackson's story, for all the genuine outrage its first readers felt and expressed, there remains a certain aesthetic buffer; our complicity in the story's culminating stoning is theoretical; that is, "The Lottery's" exposition and structure--while perhaps implicating us in its unthinking savagery--do not maneuver us into psychologically choosing to become one of the scapegoaters. We perhaps react to the climax as we would to films of Nazi war crimes: with a horror leavened by our presumed moral distance from the monsters who perpetrated them.

Like that of "The Lottery," the ending of "The Blue Hotel" harbors the shock of recognition for the reader. But our collusion in the violence of Crane's story is actual. Crane manipulates the Swede's alternating puling and bullying to engender our visceral and therefore complicitous reaction. I suspect the reader's pulse quickens during the brawl between Johnny and the Swede over the latter's charge of cheating (the Cowboy, an Everyman figure, is reduced to an atavistic bloodlust). And I suspect that reader's ego deflates upon the Swede's unexpected victory. Seemingly instinctively, we choose to stand against this "outsider," the marginal man who, alone among the tale's five primary characters, is denied a name even to the point of being stripped of his proper ethnicity.

But the revelatory dollop of exposition placed in the story's denouement collapses the margin between fiction and reality. We learn that for all his repulsive behavior, the

Swede is both the victim of human duplicity (Johnny had cheated) as well as a kind of amoral visionary who instinctively names the latent violence lurking at the edges of the Blue Hotel. With that knowledge, the reader is left stranded either in the camp of the Easterner's pusillanimity in failing to name Johnny's cheating when he saw it (the terror of vision) or in that of the Cowboy--inarticulate and uncomprehending (the inertia of blindness)--who ends the story with a plea copped in various guises from grammar school to Nuremberg: "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?" "Every sin," the Easterner/Crane teaches us, "is the result of a collaboration."

"The Blue Hotel"'s denouement has generally not fared well at the hands of the critics. It is, as several have pointed out, a second ending, offering a "moralizing appendix" (Stallman) to the story's first, more dramatically concise and aesthetically satisfying conclusion in which the mortally wounded Swede stares up into "a dreadful legend" resting atop a cash register: "This registers the amount of your purchase." Indeed, Stallman contends that the two endings "contradict each other in their philosophical import. What traps the Swede is his fixed idea of his environment, but according to the second conclusion it is the environment itself that traps him. The two endings thus confound each other and negate the (story's) artistic unity" (488).

However, it is only when we view this story within the context of visionary literature that we see that these two endings are not contradictory but rather complementary. The Swede is indeed "trapped" by the chaos of his environment. Physical nature in the form of a blizzard howls and screams; the hotel's color is said to "howl and scream"; and the men that hotel harbors will literally howl and scream as well. Moreover, the Swede's movement from the hotel--where "a guest...has sacred privileges"--to the infernal saloon--marked by "an indomitable red light" where he meets his death--is no movement at all. He moves across a blasted, existential landscape--

He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it. (311)

--and arrives where he began in a setting marked, like that of the hotel, by an outward calm but harboring a cold, sudden, virtually indifferent leathalness.

The Swede--like Bartleby and Miss Lonelyhearts--is a good reader. His conception of the West, garnered from "dime store novels," may indeed be a monomania, but it is a true and accurate rendering of the essential nature--the environment--of his world. That Crane's literary text is about learning to

competently read the text of the world is emphasized by the Easterner (who is Crane's persona) who observes that the man who killed the Swede "isn't even a noun. He is a kind of an adverb." The grammar of the visionary is harsh and uncompromising.