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## To Die Laughing and to Laugh at Dying: Revisiting *The Awakening*\*

Anca Parvulescu

It is when I collapse that I have a start.

—George Bataille

TIME HAS COME to reread *The Awakening*. In new times, it might be worth giving our texts another chance, let them run another risk. We might learn to open our ears to other things, familiar things that nevertheless might ring otherwise. The present reading revisits this well-known novel through a reconsideration of the apparently familiar notion of awakening. An encounter will be staged between the text of *The Awakening* and that of George Bataille's *Inner Experience*. Awakening will thus come to read "awakening-unto-death," awakening qua recognition and acceptance of the fact of death, the absolute limit of experience and knowledge. The moment at the very end of the novel, the moment Edna is ready to embrace the unknown of the sea, will be identified as the promise of this awakening. A last image this reading will risk will be that of an Edna beyond the novel, an Edna laughing while swimming. The events preceding and supposedly leading to this ending will be read as a story of intoxication, an intoxication meant to avoid or at least postpone the moment of awakening as awakening-unto-death.

Given that this novel is one of the most important texts of the American feminist literary canon, the consequences of such a rereading for feminist theorizing need to be considered. In other words, if this is a seminal text for feminism, how does a rereading in such terms affect the way we think about feminism? I will engage this problem by reversing the usual question of the relation between feminism and a literary text. Instead of attempting to read and thus, in Derridean terms, sign a novel *for* feminism, I will be interested in a feminism *for* the novel. Indeed, what kind of feminism do we need for this novel? We have to listen to Edna first.

\* I am grateful to Paula Rabinowitz, Jani Scandura, John Mowitz, and Karen Steigman for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

### I. What does Edna want?

*The double.* Edna's drama is that she experiences herself as double. There is an empirical self living in "the world" and going about its daily routine, and there is a self-reflective self that meditates on the empirical self and has insights into its fiction. Here is the flashback introducing the motif of the double: "At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions."<sup>1</sup> The novel thematizes a tension—the tension within a self that lives itself as double, as oscillation between an "outward" life in which one "conforms" and an "inward" life in which one "questions": "He [Mr. Pontellier] could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which we appear before the world" (A 57). What the inward life questions is the conformity of the everyday life and, with it, everything that is everyday, normal. While "unthinking" and "habit" characterize outward life, "stubbornness" and "resistance" characterize inward life: "Another time she would have gone in at his [Mr. Pontellier's] request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. . . . With a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted" (A 32).

This is not an easy life. Because this instability, this oscillation or flickering, is constantly and painfully revealing the vulnerability of the self. It is lived through—sudden, "instinctive"—moments of rupture when one momentarily passes from a state of nonseeing to one of seeing. These moments of rupture, when one moves from the so-called empirical self to the self-reflexive self, but when, for a blink-of-the-eye instant, one "is" neither one nor the other, are experienced as an insight into death. Thus, the flickering, when lived in this acute form, is felt as a chilling moment of anguish, of a certain kind of terror. Through its experience, Edna sees herself and the world around her with new eyes, and both are revealed to be "grotesque" (A 58). Edna's husband, Léonce, is the embodiment of this world. We will therefore consider what he is, so we can understand what Edna resists both in "the world" and within herself.

*The world.* The first thing we abruptly find out about Léonce Pontellier's physical appearance is that he wears eyeglasses. He is distinguished not

so much by the fact that he does not see very well but that his eyes are covered. In the opening scene, he is presented as compensating for this blocked vision with his struggle to focus, to “apply himself” (A 3) to reading. And focus not on anything but the newspaper, on exhausting what the newspaper has to offer after the most important parts—the financial ones—have already been processed. Despite his “application,” within the dynamics of vision-metaphors proposed by the novel, he is and will remain the character that cannot see. A “colorless existence” (A 57) lived in “blind contentment” (A 57) characterize him and “the world” he stands for. In contradistinction, Edna’s eyes are “quick and bright” (A 5), and hers is a struggle to see better and, finally, to simply see.

Léonce’s first words to Edna, at the beginning of the novel, are anticipatory of the reaction she will stir: “What folly!” (A 4). Indeed, the place “the world” has for Edna is that of folly, a place she shares with children, to whom she is often compared through their common preoccupation with “some utter nonsense” (A 5). In the world Mr. Pontellier represents, Edna’s attempt at self-reflection renders her “odd” (A 65). When faced with the threat of intimate proximity to this oddity, which, we later find out, is first and foremost a threat to his finances, Mr. Pontellier needs to struggle to maintain his “composure” (A 8) so he can go on with his serious business. It is this “composure” that best characterizes “the world,” an insistence on maintaining a social mask in the face of which Edna is ready to laugh. It is therefore the spectacle offered by her *agelast* husband,<sup>2</sup> the spectacle of his fight for composure, that ultimately makes Edna stop playing the game. Which is not to say that Mr. Pontellier is a bad husband. On the contrary, he is the perfect husband: “Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit she knew of none better” (A 9). And this is his problem. He behaves the way he is supposed to, that is, the way the conventions Edna begins to question have it. What he needs to do, and needs to have Edna do, is “keep up with the procession” (A 51), while Edna needs to think about the procession as a procession, to “realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (A 15).

Edna begins to see the world of Mr. Pontellier as a “grotesque pandemonium” (A 58)—*grotesque* in the etymological sense of *grotto*-esque or cave-like. The dinner party she devotes herself to organizing thus becomes a reversed wedding that marks her departure from the *grotto* as matrimonial *pandemonium* (“a place represented by Milton as the capital of Hell”).<sup>3</sup> The luxury, the “veritable Lucullan feast” (A 111), into which Edna transforms this mock-wedding with “sèvres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in” (A 85), anticipates her entry into a different economy in which expenditure is absolute or not at all.

The advocate of this envisioned economy is here the sumptuous, enormous, necessarily very expensive, exuberant piece of jewelry that Edna chooses to wear on this occasion—"a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered in Edna's hair" (A 86). Like the champagne, enough to swim in, the cluster of diamonds is necessarily of hyperbolic dimensions. In its sputtering, its explosive effect, it is the promise of a "grand affair" (A 85), of a veritable "*coup d'état*" (A 85). Of course, Léonce Pontellier is the advocate of expenditure too: he encourages Edna to go shopping, and he is always ready to invest in remodeling their "charming house." But his is a calculated, typical bourgeois expenditure.<sup>4</sup> His spending is a form of investment: he invests in himself, in the reproduction of his wealth. Edna's economy will ultimately renounce calculation in favor of absolute exaggeration.<sup>5</sup> In a brilliant ironic twist, the husband-to-be-left is appropriately left to pay the bills of this wedding.

It is "the world" as an unthinking, habitual "procession" that Edna resists. And, more importantly, her own self as it unthinkingly walks, moves, sits, stands, goes through the daily treadmill of a life that has been "portioned out" to her within the "procession." "Thinking about thinking" (A 17) is a mode of self-reflection that does not allow for the "procession" to fully control her. But it is also an experience of terror. It is a modern experience of radical questioning, of finding oneself without anchorage in ideals such as that of the "mother-woman" or of the "artist." In order to be able to still live in "the world" with this painfully flickering consciousness, the self devises means of dealing with the terror, of covering it up through a process of intoxication. Intoxication will be the temporary answer to the terror of radical interrogation.

*Intoxication.* There are moments when Edna seems to experience a certain awakening. An awakening to what?—has been the main question asked by Chopin criticism. Most often, the answer has suggested a sexual awakening.<sup>6</sup> But these moments are described in the novel in the language of at least two registers, one being indeed the language of awakening, and the other being the language of intoxication.<sup>7</sup> The latter is often overlooked, or otherwise not discussed in the same breath with awakening. When the two are, however, grasped together, the text consents to a different reading. What we have in these cases is not awakening per se but something like a dream of awakening made possible by an intoxication-induced sleep. This dreamlike state gives the self-reflective self the illusion of identity with the empirical self. Dreams, however, only function as further putting to sleep. Only at the very end of the novel, when the dream seems to approach the point of its interruption and leave room for a state of indefinite insomnia, the

promise of awakening finds its possibility. It is not when one dreams about the awakening, but when one dreams about dreaming, that one is close to awakening: "The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain dupe to illusions all one's life" (A 110). If Edna perceives her life as a dream, this moment is the closest one can get to awakening: *We are close to waking when we dream about dreaming*.<sup>8</sup> The end of the novel does just that—it brings us "close." It is an anticipation, a promise of an awakening. But when the story ends, the awakening is still to come. This is why the novel, while anticipating the awakening, is, in terms of its story if not in its spirit, a tale of intoxication.

And intoxication will take different forms. There is, for example, a certain comfort in tears, a sensuousness even: "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself" (A 8). The experience is indescribable, untraceable to any recognizable cause, familiar and strange at the same time, a shadow, a mist, a mood. A "good cry" functions as a means to soften the experience, to make it less painful, to amortize it. What seems to be a progression toward an even more painful self-awareness is solved by a "good cry," by the expenditure of tears. Later on, this moment is described as "the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears" (A 14). Indeed, this, like any experience of intoxication, is an abandonment that temporarily covers up the pain of the double.

It would be insufficient to say that what Edna wants is power, even if that only means power over her own self. Because power too finds its way in the novel through a language of intoxication. The moment of power is the moment of learning to swim. After having tried all summer, success is a moment of glory: "How easy it is!" she thought. 'It is nothing,' she said aloud; 'why did I not discover before that it was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!' She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone" (A 29). The insight into the easiness of swimming functions as the moment of "I can do anything!" The flying Mademoiselle Reisz suggests is another variant of this swimming: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (A 82). Swimming and flying are metaphors of woman's access to power. Now Edna knows she

can do things: she can stay outside when her husband asks her to go inside, she can paint and make money, she can leave her husband's house and move into her own, she can give her love to whomever she chooses, she can have illicit sex, she can die of her own free will. She can become a "regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (A 88). But power too is a narcotic that can only temporarily cover up the anguish of the double. The conclusion of the first swim episode—the encounter with death and subsequent retreat from the encounter—can only be explained through her state of intoxication. The narcotic of power stops Edna from facing anguish, from going toward the ultimate experience that will be pushed to its limit only at the end of the novel.

Love, the novel seems to suggest, is the best narcotic. And especially when combined with Mademoiselle Reisz's music, as during the reading of Robert's letter. But love is privileged by Edna only insofar as she is anticipated, indeed, expected, to take a lover both by Madame Ratignolle and by Doctor Mandélet—and, indeed, pushed by them, by the reader. Love is the narcotic in which, within the sequence of events in the novel, Edna puts her last hope: "When she thought that he was there at hand, waiting for her, she grew numb with the intoxication of expectancy" (A 110). But, again, numbness is a fugitive state. Soon, love too is revealed as another delusion, for Robert does not understand, Robert cannot and will never understand. Robert and the love he advocates for are finally unmasked as part and parcel of the "procession":

"You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I would laugh at you both."

His face grew a little white. "What do you mean?" he asked. (A 106)

At the end of the novel, Edna indeed laughs at them both. And especially at the "both" that Léonce Pontellier and Robert Lebrun constitute, after all. This is a "both" founded in their shared idea of love as necessarily marital, contractual. Edna has hopes for another kind of love. While Robert dreams of an exchange, with himself and Mr. Pontellier as exchangers, Edna dreams the wild dream of escaping the exchange system: "I give myself where I choose." The answer to Robert's question ("What do you mean?")—a question that, by extension, can be said to be the question "the world," including that of Chopin criticism, asks—will fail to come. What does come, however, or at least promises to come, is the moment of laughter Edna anticipates here and that might be the only answer to Robert's question.

Painting, another suggested solution to Edna's torment, is yet another form of intoxication. Here is Mademoiselle Reisz's aesthetic credo:

"To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul."

"What do you mean by the courageous soul?"

"Courageous, *ma foi!* The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies." (A 63)

What other words could describe Edna better than "the brave soul that dares and defies"? Yet, she does not "succeed," not only because painting is not a solution to Edna's terror but also because "success" is not the measure of her adventure. The end of the novel will therefore unmask art, too, as a mystification that, as the episode of Edna reading Robert's letter suggests, goes hand in hand with the romance scenario Edna leaves behind. Edna has dared and defied but it was all an illusion. Not even art, often the idealized escape strategy, can conquer terror.

Then there is sex. Here is the scene that introduces Edna to eroticism: "She lit a candle and went up to her room. Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (A 77). Note that she thinks about her relationship with Alcée Arobin and that she prepares for the experience. She *decides* to have sex with him. The memory of his touch functions as a promise of an even stronger intoxicant. She will try sex with a man she does not care about, thus dissociating the two intoxicants usually brought together by tradition: love and sex. She tries them separately, as if to increase their power.

Finally, gambling: "The fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant" (A 74). Betting at the races describes the essence of the intoxicant: it is a temporary fever. It does not matter so much if one wins, although winning does add to the excitement. What matters is, like in the episode of the luxurious dinner, the passion of spending. When the effects of the fever are over, however, one is left blank, in a painful state that does not find comfort: "I feel as if I had been wound up to a certain pitch—too tight—and something inside me snapped" (A 91). After the pitch of intoxication—whether intoxication takes the form of tears, power, love, art, sex, or gambling—there can only be a "snap."

*The sea.* Here is Mr. Pontellier: "She's got some notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (A 65). "Eternal" seems to be the word around which Edna's behavior can be understood: her desire



functions in a time for which we use the word “eternal” and in referring to which an imagery of the sea and the ocean seems appropriate. The motif of the eternal is introduced for the first time through the image of a “meadow that seemed as big as the ocean” (A 18). Edna has here her first experience of “following a misleading impulse . . . idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (A 18). It is an experience of terror and of pleasure at the same time. It is an impulse but it is misleading, it lures her into going toward something one knows one will never reach: “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (A 14). Her desire will be to follow this light and ultimately see the sun. All the key moments in the novel need to happen in the presence of the sun. Desire is thus, like the sun, a light that shows the way and blocks sight at the same time. There are no “pictures” in this space, no representations, only the “passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” (A 27). What Edna is doing is “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (A 47). Desire is for abandonment, for the “unlimited.” In the quick glance at this “unlimited,” during the episode of the first swim, Edna has an encounter with death which is experienced as a “flash of terror” (A 29). Again, this moment is not lived as utterly negative: “I never was so exhausted in my life. But it isn’t unpleasant” (A 30). The encounter with death is lived as the promise of the awakening. It gives insight into the necessity of accepting the night of death, the anguish of death, as the only means of approaching the desired sun. It is only in the midst of darkness, only from within the abyss of the sea, that flight toward the sun is possible. The terror is overwhelming though, and at this point in the story Edna needs and welcomes what she thinks is the best intoxicant: love. The moment of terror will be pushed to its limit only at the end of the novel, after love too has been uncovered as soporific.

Edna’s desire is directed toward “something unattainable” (A 33), something that would rupture the anchorage that has held her so far and would permit her to see. But the mode in which the novel describes these moments is one of “not yet.” Edna is never close to achieving her desire, which necessarily is and will always be a “not yet,” a striving and a foreclosure and a permanent postponement. It is only from beyond the novel, from after the experience at the end of the novel, that this “not yet” is to be realized. The time of desire is the future perfect: we do not know what it will have brought. Within the novel, Edna can only resist the “grotesque pandemonium” and strive toward “the unattainable,” which she intuitively anticipates as a “delirium”: “a pity for the colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish visited her soul,

in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by 'life's delirium.' It had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression" (A 57).

*The experience.* The awakening only happens at the end, better yet, after the end of the novel. There is a progression toward this moment, but the awakening is not a presence within the novel. Nor is the progression a linear one—it is a series of moments whose order can be reversed. In fact, Edna is closer to the experience of awakening at the beginning of the novel, before the series of intoxications. But awakening can only be linked to the experience at the end of novel. Awakening only begins at the point of encounter with something that suspends thought because it cannot be thought and desired at the same time—death. At the end of the novel, thought is indeed suspended—"She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach" (A 113)—and what we have is a lived experience in which knowing and doing merge. And this is the promise of a new beginning, of the awakening.

Time is divided at this point in the novel between a past as illusion, as sleep, as intoxication, as ontological bad faith; a present "close" to an awakening that is to be an instant, a flash, a burst of laughter; and a future as a series of anticipated and predictable moments of relapse into self-mystification, the danger of which is represented by "the children."<sup>9</sup> Edna thus needs to fight the always-present threat of "the children," the threat of becoming a mother-woman, a "mother for the race" (A 110), of finding peace, comfort, happiness. The novel ends with the promise of her finding a "way to elude them" (A 113), that is, "the children" but also herself as intoxicated self, of finding a way to continuously foreground the ontological bad faith. The sentence, "She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for the children" (A 113), can only be understood in this light. Edna's two children as empirical beings are never in question, what is in question is "the children," the problem of "the children," as the danger and the temptation of belonging to the procession of mothers. This is the problem that, in view of her seeing Adèle Ratignolle give birth, has no solution: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (A 113). Not "sacrificing herself for her children" translates into another, more meaningful, more "essential," form of sacrifice that she begins to envision now.

*Feminism.* Edna is not a feminist. At least not within the notion of feminism that the text defines. She does not associate with the "pseudo-

intellectual” women that Doctor Mandelet immediately thinks of and that we now recognize as the suffragists of the day. The feminists as suffragists want something; *Edna does not want anything*. Or she does not know what she wants. Or she wants everything. In any case, her desire is not recuperable within feminism.<sup>10</sup> Granted, she is anything but a representative of the eternal feminine described by Doctor Mandelet, as she is aware she is quite unwomanly in her newly acquired “habit of expressing [her]self” (A 104). She is also struggling to understand “what character of a woman” (A 82) she is, giving the impression she might, after all, share, at least in part, the plea of “the feminists.” But when one of the “pseudo-intellectual” women is introduced at Edna’s farewell dinner party, in the person of Miss Mayblunt, a paper-combatant, it is more than clear that if the latter is writing under a *nom de guerre*, this is not Edna’s *guerre*. She is not ironical toward the feminists, as the doctor is, she even seems to understand their fight, but her stakes are simply not there. She will not, in fact, want a *guerre* at all; she is, as suggested in the same dinner episode, after a *coup d’état*.

*The end.* Does Edna commit suicide? Is Edna at the end “different and diminished”? Is she “completely defeated”? Is she “destroyed”? Does she “simply die”? Does she “collapse”?<sup>11</sup> What Edna has is an *experience* of death. Which does not necessarily mean she is dying. And if she is “collapsing,” collapse is here by no means synonymous with “simply dying.” Edna has a vision of death when swimming for the first time and—terrified—she retreats from the encounter. Now, with the “collapse,” all narcotics having been tried, the moment of the awakening is inevitable. Edna faces this moment naked: “she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (A 113). The whole novel was written for this moment and writing at this point staggers toward nakedness too. Edna is now ready to confront death, to face death. Such is the nature of her awakening: it is an awakening-unto-death. We do not know if she dies, we only know she is ready to die. Or that she is ready to live as if dead. This is the limit of knowing. From now on, there are “no plot alternatives,”<sup>12</sup> because there can be no “plot” at this point. Death is the absolute unknowable. Edna enters an *other* space—the sea. And, as opposed to the striated space of known, sedentary trajectories (and plots) that she is leaving behind, the sea is a smooth space characterized by a “polyvocality of directions.”<sup>13</sup> At this point Edna cannot be narrativized anymore, she has gone vagabonding on an unknown and unknowable terrain. The novel ends. But this ending/no ending is a way of saying no to the possibility of there being at this point a story of Edna. She has become slippery, ungraspable.

Readings of the novel find the ending frustrating in its abruptness. Suicide makes sense and does not make sense. It makes sense within a framework in which Edna is at the end of her story, she has tried everything, but, as her final conversation with Robert shows, within “the world,” the alternative to marriage is another marriage. Suicide marks here a strong statement: woman is trapped, there is no way out. It does not make sense if the context is “struggle.” There has been a progression toward an emancipated and powerful Edna. She has had important victories over “the world.” In other words, she has gone a long way; why stop here? Both readings look for narrative closure when the novel refuses one. Both need to know what happens to Edna when Edna gives up the illusion to know what happens at that moment. She is finally ready to welcome the smoothness of the unknown sea and its “delirium.”

A reading that looks for narrative closure is always performed in a mode of “recuperation”: it resuscitates Edna, it “saves” her from the unknown toward which she is moving. It is the symptom of the Oedipal desire to know and to know to the end, to unveil the truth and through the unveiling of the truth to cover Edna’s indecent nakedness. But Edna’s invitation at the end of the novel is to resist the temptation of resuscitation and to welcome the unknown of death, of the smooth sea. In this sense, the text has predicted its own destiny, its early feminist recuperation, through the episode of the first swim; but it has also offered, through its ending, the strategy of resisting such recuperation. Through a reading in the recuperation mode, the illusion of knowing is recuperated at the level of reading. Edna is tamed, her desire is understood, “the world” goes on without having heard the message. But Edna is laughing, indeed, has the last laugh, and we can push our ears to hear this laughter.

## II. What does Edna want?

*Disintoxication.* The end of the novel shows Edna go to the limits of the possible, the limits of knowing. Bataille has called this moment “inner experience” and has referred to it as an awakening.<sup>14</sup> This is where thought begins for Bataille: “But what happens to us when, *disintoxicated*, we learn what we are?”<sup>15</sup> Bataille’s *Inner Experience* is concerned with the moment immediately following disintoxication: What happens after the love, the sex, the gambling, the tears, and the art? Bataille asks. He answers, “I threw myself in the water.”<sup>16</sup>

Bataille is following G. W. F. Hegel, taking up Hegel’s challenge of a need of a direct confrontation with death. In Hegel’s view, freedom must look death in the face in its striving for “absolute knowledge.” Bataille endorses Hegel’s insight up to what he sees as its “blind spot”: the point where, in his view, Hegel maintains that life that is exposed to

risk should nevertheless in the end be maintained, held back and reinvested. In his revision of Hegel, Bataille thus calls for what Jacques Derrida has coined “a Hegelianism without reserve,” an absolute negativity as the only possibility of exiting the “restricted economy” within which we produce meaning. He asks for a complete abandonment in the face of death and an absolute expenditure of the self.<sup>17</sup> It is this “Hegelianism without reserve” that I want to link to *The Awakening’s* description of the moment immediately following intoxication, as a “snap,” to suggest that the end of the novel, with its image of Edna entering the sea, brings such a complete, absolute expenditure of the self as an awakening-unto-death.

We do not know what happens at the moment of unreserved confrontation with death, but what we know is that this moment is not in any way reassuring: “I abandon all hope for a logical harmony and dedicate myself to *improbability*” (*IE* 70). Or, “I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted non-knowledge to be its principle” (*IE* 3). The experience of death as inner experience will solve nothing for us, it is not a weapon or a tool in the general sense, we cannot invest in it. At this point, “happiness” is out of the question, and “torment” is welcomed.

Inner experience is an experience of acute suffering; it is anguish, it is terror. Let us call it death, Bataille will suggest: “I call experience a voyage to the end of the possible of man” (*IE* 7). Death comes to be perceived as a seductive opener of unknown paths: “Like a marvelous madwoman, death unceasingly opened or closed the gates of the possible” (*IE* xxxiii). Inner experience is an encounter with death, thus neither “inner,” since it does not happen to a self, as there is no self in death; nor “experience,” since there is no recognizable pattern of an “event.” Inner experience is thus an ironic formulation that reveals the limits of language. Ironic is also the connotation with awakening: inner experience is an awakening only insofar as awakening is read as a-wakening, as a grammatically ambiguous verbal form of the root “wake.” The irony of awakening is that it marks the impossibility of a juncture between life and death, a juncture at which “The door must remain open and shut at the same time” (*IE* 92). In a sense, “awakening,” like “silence,” is an impossible word.

*The wake.* In order to talk about death, Bataille introduces the motif of dramatization. Dramatization is played out between two selves. The self-reflective self goes to the limit of putting the empirical self to death: “there is battle and rupture (there is no way out), between the desire to give oneself completely to the bacchanalia which breaks out and

destroys, and the concern to last, to participate in the bacchanalia without being dead" (*IE* 194). In other words, there is desire to die and there is desire to live to see oneself die. Bataille makes sense of this impossible situation by referring to the Irish and Welsh tradition of the wake. If "in order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be,"<sup>18</sup> the wake gives him the means to envision such a situation. The only way for us to experience death while living is by means of a "subterfuge," that is, through what Bataille calls "sacrifice": "In the sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that he struck dead. And so he dies seeing himself die, and even, in a certain way, by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon" (H 291). The wake is a variant of sacrifice: "It is the death of an *other*, but in such instances, the death of the other is always the image of one's own death" (H 291). One goes to a wake, eats and drinks *with* the dead man lying in the open coffin, and sees oneself die. Moreover, in a sense, one kills the dead person so one can witness death. In this, the prerequisite of inner experience is dramatized: "Thus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying" (H 287). Knowledge of death cannot do without this kind of subterfuge, without dramatization, without sacrifice. And if Edna, in her not wanting to "sacrifice herself for the children," envisions another form of sacrifice, then this sacrifice needs to be understood within this dialogue with Bataille: sacrifice is the dramatization of the awakening-into-death.

Awakening as a-wakening thus comes to bring together two meanings of "wake": (1) "vigil" or "funeral custom" (also used for "festival") and (2) the nautical term for "trace or track of a vessel in the water" (also used for "the disturbance caused by a body swimming" or for "the air-currents behind a body in flight").<sup>19</sup> Thus, the verb to a-wake: to put the other and yourself to death in sacrifice and to watch that putting to death and its trace in the self. Inner experience as awakening-into-death is therefore death and birth at the same time: "it is necessary for me to die (in my own eyes), to give birth to myself" (*IE* 34). The word "necessary" must be emphasized here, since at this point the self has reached the limits of the possible and death is seen as "delivering me from a world that kills me" (*IE* 74). "It is when I collapse that I have a start" (*IE* 153) is what Edna finally understands at the end of the novel.<sup>20</sup> But this start is unknown, and it should remain unknown. It is a start envisioned as a moment of laughter emerging in the midst of anguish.

*Laughter.* Here is Bataille describing the moment of inner experience as an irruption of wild laughter: "A space constellated with laughter

opened its dark abyss before me . . . I rushed into a sort of rapture. I laughed divinely . . . I laughed as perhaps one had never laughed; the extreme depth of each thing opened itself up—laid bare, as if I were dead. . . . I was illuminated convulsively; I laughed, I imagine, while running” (*IE* 34). My proposition is to imagine the sea in which Edna swims as such a dark abyss constellated with laughter. To imagine her, beyond the novel, after the moment when “the old terror flamed up for a second, then sank again” (*A* 114), laughing divinely, laughing while swimming. This would mean first of all to imagine her alive.<sup>21</sup> But also to imagine her in “ecstasy”: she finally sees, meaning, she finally sees things *as if* she were dead. Things are laid bare. She is on a different terrain: “If I attain, an instant, the extreme limit of the ‘possible,’ shortly thereafter, I will flee, I will be *elsewhere*” (*IE* 36).

Laughter also marks the moment of inner experience as a moment of pleasure. Here is Bataille: “[S]uch a flash was more desirable than erotic pleasure. I don’t see anything: *that* is neither visible nor tangible in any imaginable way; not intelligible. *That* renders painful and heavy the idea of not dying” (*IE* 122). And here is Edna: “She felt like some new born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known” (*A* 113); or, “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (*A* 113). It is this ultimately affirmative moment (nonpositively affirmative, as Michel Foucault calls it reading Bataille), the enjoyment and the laughter, that distinguishes Bataille’s account of the encounter with death from other theories of finitude and that makes it compatible with *The Awakening*.<sup>22</sup>

Bataille’s relation to “woman” is complicated.<sup>23</sup> He, after all, wonders about the “male character of effacement?” (*IE* 134). And, indeed, the subject taking up Hegel’s challenge is male. But if woman does not have access to “the extreme limit,” she is also absolutely necessary to “the experience.” She is also that madwoman that allegorizes the promise of death—“Like a marvelous madwoman, death unceasingly opened or closed the gates of the possible” (*IE* xxxiii). She is, in other words, the necessary mediator, that “like” that makes the thought of death possible in the first place. And, with that, laughter too. For Bataille knows that the “marvelous madwoman” is laughing. Jean-Luc Nancy, in his reading of Bataille, dares the statement: “*Perhaps it is always a woman’s laugh.*”<sup>24</sup> Edna literalizes the moment when, at the peak of “the experience,” laughter is perhaps always a woman’s laugh, when Bataille’s laugh is perhaps always Edna’s laugh. In following the scenario of “the self-that-dies” (*IE* 71), the “lost woman” as “marvelous madwoman” reaches the moment of laughter in which she exceeds her “like” position and moves toward another form of subjecthood—if it can still be called that—made possible by “the experience.”

*Feminism.* The question still is: what kind of feminism do we need for this novel? And we might remember, with Maurice Blanchot, that “The question is the desire for thought.”<sup>25</sup> It is in the nature of the question to persist in its asking and maybe to stubbornly insist in awaiting its answers, which, however, given the question’s structure of desire, will be in an asymptotical relation to the question, tending toward it without ever hoping to appease it. As such an answer, I will try here to sketch an image: what if we were to imagine feminism as an open, wild, exuberant burst of laughter? In the wake of Edna’s experience, following the trace of her disturbance in the water, this would mean to act as if we have been through her experience, as if we are attending her wake. Attending Edna’s wake, we “sacrifice” her and we dramatize death. This might be the beginning of an awakening: we can thus learn to see, that is, see as if our precious selves would be dead. A feminism that starts here, that finds its enabling moment in a moment of laughter in which the subject itself is dissolved but in which there is pleasure and joy, might have a chance of being truly different. Feminist theorists have had glimmerings of this idea for a long time. Hélène Cixous is probably best known for her “Laugh of the Medusa.”<sup>26</sup> But there are many other personages in what might be said to constitute an emergent community of feminist laughers.<sup>27</sup> Yet a feminist “theory of laughter”—imagining a feminism of laughter and a laughing feminism—still remains to be written. And, as it should, the question awaits.

*Community.* Starting from Chopin’s initial subtitle for the novel, “The Solitary Soul,” Edna’s experience has often been understood as an expression of individualism, either masculine or feminine.<sup>28</sup> Very often questions of community formation and especially of a possible feminist community emerging around this novel have been foreclosed by such readings. But if we read the ending of the novel as an awakening-unto-death, what we have instead is precisely a moment of community formation. Here is Bataille: “No doubt, it suffices that a single individual reach the extreme limit: for all that, between him and the others—who avoid him—he keeps a link. Without that he would only be an oddity, not the extreme limit of the ‘possible’” (*IE* 38–39). Or, “inner experience is conquest and as such *for others!*” (*IE* 61). *The Awakening* is an invitation to reconsider the oddity “the world” ascribes to Edna, to acknowledge her experience as a dramatization of inner experience and, as such, *for others*. Edna’s awakening opens the possibility of community, because, as Bataille’s engagement with the notion of sacrifice suggests, it is always the death of another (or its dramatization) that founds community. But this community is of necessity beyond what is common (identity) and beyond the commonwealth (the contract).



Therefore, a small, finite, fragile community that forms a “we,” that is not the amplified form of a subject-I.<sup>29</sup> To use a word dear to Bataille, this is a *formless* community that redefines the word community as such beyond recognition.

Inner experience is of necessity both a singular experience, because the experience of death is a singular experience, *and* an experience that has meaning only if it has meaning *for others*. Laughter becomes most important at this point, because the moment of laughter is also the moment when awakening acquires communal dimensions. In Bataille’s words, “Each isolated existence emerges from itself by means of the image betraying the error of immutable isolation. It emerges from itself in a sort of easy flash; it opens itself at the same time to the contagion of a wave which rebounds, for those who laugh, together become like the waves of the sea—there no longer exists between them any partition as long as the laughter lasts; they are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters” (*IE* 96). To laugh is to enter the space of the smooth sea and, with it, that of a fragile community of isolated existences. This is why when we see Edna finally turning her head toward the abyssal sea we have to imagine her laughing: die laughing and laugh at dying.<sup>30</sup> And we have to open ourselves to the contagion of that laughter, because, in its being witness to Edna’s sacrifice, it offers the promise of a new community, a new wave, not separated from other waves and yet producing another sort of agitation of the waters.

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#### NOTES

1 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening, An Authoritative Text*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976), 15 (hereafter cited in the text as *A*).

2 The term “agelast” is Rabelais’s, via Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. Agelasts are representatives of *l’esprit des sérieux* and, as such, cannot laugh and are hostile to laughter. While Edna is ready to laugh in the face of “the world,” Léonce, with his permanent preoccupation with the welfare of his finances, certainly makes a good candidate for entry in Rabelais’s gallery of nonlaughers. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 267.

3 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “pandemonium.”

4 This is not to extricate Edna from her middle-class condition. Indeed, her whole adventure is possible only for a middle-class woman, with enough (racialized) domestic help to leave her space for painting or “thinking about thinking” (*A* 17). However, it is to suggest that the dinner episode coupled with the ending of the novel allude to a different economy that is an attack on bourgeois life.

5 Sandra Gilbert’s reading is among the few to note the importance of the dinner episode within the economy of the novel. See “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire,” in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land: The Place*

of the *Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). For her, *The Awakening* is proposing “a feminist dream of a sexual culture beyond culture” (93), and Edna is an “Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the patriarchal western myth of Jesus” (96). In this framework, the dinner moment is interpreted as a “Last Supper, a final transformation of will and desire into bread and wine, flesh and blood, before the ‘regal woman’s’ inevitable crucifixion by a culture in which a regenerated Aphrodite has no viable role” (108). While this is a powerful reading of the novel, I would argue that here luxury is not seen as luxury; it is read in a metaphorical key, thus losing its subversive overtones as exaggeration: subversion of Mr. Pontellier’s world as a world of calculated expenditure.

6 See Wendy Martin, ed., introduction to *New Essays on The Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1. Patricia Yaeger’s reading of the novel is the welcome exception in this tradition. See Yaeger, “‘A Language Which Nobody Understood’: Emancipation Strategies in *The Awakening*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 3 (1987): 197–219. Here is Yaeger: “[I]nsofar as feminist critics read Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* as a novel about sexual liberation, we read it with our patriarchal biases intact” (197). As an alternative to a reading for such a plot, Yaeger offers an analysis of the novel’s linguistic struggle for a “language which nobody understood.” Yaeger’s reading marks a turning point in Chopin criticism that distances Edna from an Emma Bovary scenario and the discussion of the novel from yet another *guerelle des femmes*, another struggle over the nature of woman in her relation to wedlock and love.

7 Elaine Showalter is aware of the language of intoxication. See Showalter, “Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book,” in Martin, *New Essays on The Awakening*, 33–55. Here is Showalter: “Edna welcomes both kinds of feelings [intoxication and languor] because they are intense, and thus preserve her from the tedium of ordinary existence. They are in fact adolescent emotions, suitable to a heroine who is belatedly awakening; but Edna does not go beyond them to an adulthood that offers new experiences and responsibilities” (48–49). While Showalter is right to point to the amortizing effect of intoxicants, the danger here might be that of explaining their use, like “the world,” as childishness, immaturity.

8 This is Friedrich Schlegel’s *Athenaeum Fragment* 288, echoed by Jacques Lacan. See Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 58; and Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 56–57.

9 I am using here—like in my engagement with subjectivity along the divide empiric/self-reflexive—a vocabulary borrowed from Paul de Man. See de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228.

10 *The Awakening* can be said—and its nature as a “seminal” text might indeed reside here—to have anticipated the later division within feminism between “reformers” and “radicals.” Within this narrow divide, Edna would be on the radical side, the proponents of which, especially on the French feminist scene, very often refuse the words “feminism” and “feminist” as being appropriated by the reformers of the suffragist tradition. It is with such observations in mind that one insists on revisiting those canonical texts that have “survived the test of time”—and it is indeed ironical that *The Awakening* would today belong here. (On this point, see Todd McGowan, *The Feminine “No!”: Psychoanalysis and the New Canon* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001].) We revisit them because they have formed us, because, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, they *are* us. See Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

11 George M. Spangler’s formulations. See Spangler, “Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: A Partial Dissent,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 3 (1970): 249–55. Starting from—and indeed

often rejecting—this kind of reception of the novel, Chopin criticism has read the ending of the novel as suicide. Suicide is understood in different, often contradictory, ways, but the novel's ending as suicide is almost never questioned. (For a review and critique of suicide interpretations, see Robert Treu, "Surviving Edna: A Reading of the Ending of *The Awakening*," *College Literature* 27, no. 2 [Spring 2000]: 21–36). Even Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in a book concerned with "writing beyond the ending," still reads the ending of *The Awakening* as suicide. See DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). The notable exception in this tradition is Gilbert's reading. But even her position is ambivalent. She acknowledges that, if read realistically, the end of the novel shows Edna commit suicide. If read metaphorically, however, Edna's death, "if it is a death, it is a death associated with a resurrection, a sort of pagan female Good Friday that promises an Aphroditic Easter" ("The Second Coming of Aphrodite," 109). In my reading, this interpretation in a mythic key, to a large extent, forecloses the promise of Gilbert's own question, which I believe should be pursued all the way: "And how, after all, do we know that she ever dies?" ("The Second Coming of Aphrodite," 110; emphasis in original).

12 Gilbert, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite," 107.

13 The distinction between these two types of spaces is made by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 382. They identify the steppe, the desert, and the sea as horizonless, smooth (*lisse*) spaces of the rhizome type. See also Paula Rabinowitz's reading of *The Awakening*, offering a powerful image of Edna at the end of the novel entering her canvas (Rabinowitz, "Swimming into the Canvas," MS).

14 George Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 175. On Bataille and awakening see also Denis Hollier, "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille," in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 59–73.

15 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), xxxii (hereafter cited in text as *IE*).

16 Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, 163.

17 Jacques Derrida offers this reading of Bataille in "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 251–77. What Derrida is discussing here is Bataille's reading of Hegel through Alexander Kojève. For one challenge to the Kojève/Bataille/Derrida sequence of approaches to Hegel, see Joseph C. Flay, "Hegel, Derrida, and Bataille's Laughter" and Judith Butler's response, "Commentary," in *Hegel and His Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*, ed. William Desmond (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

18 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," in *Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 286–87 (hereafter cited in text as H).

19 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "wake."

20 In his reading of the Lacanian variant of this scenario, Slavoj Žižek takes a dramatically different conceptual route to reach a similar conclusion to Bataille's. See Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For Lacan/Žižek, there is only one true "act" of "absolute freedom" and that is what they call "symbolic suicide." This is indeed, in Žižek's words, "the point at which Lacan rejoins Hegel" (53): "an act of 'losing all,' of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,' from the point of absolute freedom called by Hegel 'abstract negativity'" (43). This "symbolic suicide"—and this is important in the context of *The Awakening's* suicide interpretations—is to be strictly opposed to what Žižek calls

“suicide ‘in reality’” (43) and, in fact, is not a suicide at all in the common sense of the word, since it is concomitant with, in Žižek’s words, “what, in a vulgarly pathetic way, we call a ‘new life’” (44). On the point at which Lacan joins Bataille through Hegel, see also Julia Kristeva, “Bataille, Experience and Practice,” in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 237–63.

21 Vladimir Propp tells us that laughter is par excellence the sign of life. See Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore (A Propos of the Tale of the Princess Who Would Not Laugh [Nesmejána])” in *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 134. There is, in fact, a “threshold of laughter” between life and death, and if one is forbidden to laugh in the kingdom of the dead, any “new birth” is accompanied by laughter.

22 Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in Botting and Wilson, *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, 24–40.

23 For an analysis of woman in Bataille’s thought, see Suzanne Guerlac, “‘Recognition’ by a Woman!” *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 90–105. Guerlac discusses the place of woman in Bataille’s writing on eroticism, which she sees as central to his “project.” In my reading of Bataille, laughter occupies the central place that Guerlac ascribes to eroticism. Laughter is one element in a series that contains eroticism, poetry, and sacrifice, but it is also an umbrella term under which these other terms are subsumed (“Laughter is the only way out,” reads one of Bataille’s notes [IE 204]). If, instead of imagining “the extreme limit” as a moment of eroticism, one imagines it as a moment of laughter, woman might have another fate. Žižek reaches a similar conclusion when he writes: “but *the act was hers*.” See *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 60.

24 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Laughter, Presence,” in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 368, my emphasis.

25 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14.

26 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

27 To name a few—Diane Davis, Claudine Herrmann, Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Denise Riley, Avital Ronell, Mary Russo.

28 See, respectively, Andrew Delbanco, “The Half-Life of Edna Pontellier,” in Martin, *New Essays on The Awakening*; and Showalter, “Tradition and the Female Talent.”

29 On the relation between the pronouns *we* and *I*, see Emile Benveniste, “The Nature of Pronouns,” in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 217–22.

30 “To Die Laughing and to Laugh at Dying” is the title of one of Bataille’s unfinished essays.