

Art and Otherness: Tragic Visions in Modern Literature

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Abstract

My dissertation is entitled Art and Otherness: Tragic Visions in Modern Literature. The two main subjects of inquiry I take up are the figure of the 'other'—both as an expression of phenomenological alterity and as a postcolonial subject—and the representation of this figure in modern literature. I investigate the intersections between these two subjects, i.e. whether art is an especially insightful medium or discourse to discuss the subject of otherness in the sense that it represents a disruption within the nature of experience that resembles the encounter with the 'other'.

As a basic rationale, my dissertation also accordingly attempts a self-reflexivity grounded in problematizing both the formulation of and interaction between competing conventions of otherness. More succinctly, I attempt herein a methodology that reads across discourses whilst remaining on their margins, with the dual purpose of avoiding the self-confirmation of each

rationation and finding, specifically in art (and in particular literature), a discursive practice that seeks to avoid, or perhaps transcend, a stable definition of otherness.

To effectively probe the various political, psychological, existential and phenomenal aspects of otherness, my project and chapters are organized around these separate but overlapping dimensions. My selected texts are predominantly from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a particular focus on Modernist literature, as the latter's anxieties about the nature of art and of the other are particularly useful to probe these and other relevant questions.

I focus primarily on fiction by Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Albert Camus, Kamel Daoud, Don DeLillo, Saadat Hasan Manto, Yann Martel and Herman Melville, to which I apply a variety of theoretical lenses. I juxtapose these texts from different literary canons and maintain a correspondingly interdisciplinary critical approach in order to disentangle the figure of the other from various competing ontological and theoretical systems. My premise for this methodology is that pairing and reading these texts in unusual contexts allows for a drawing out of shared symbology, themes and metaphors and opens up a space for a more robust conversation about the relationship between art and otherness.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Things That Happen in the Dark.....	11
Side Eye, or Fun with Words.....	64
Each in His Prison.....	112
The Tiger and the Whale.....	169
Final Thoughts.....	218
Works Cited.....	226

Introduction

As an ontological construct, 'otherness' is so pervasive across various disciplines and discourses that the term itself seems to behave as a placeholder, taking on and discarding meaning depending entirely on rhetorical context. It is perhaps only a slightly oversimplification to claim that the extremities of 'other' are by definition self-referential, in that they are affixed, sustained and confirmed by the epistemological systems that draw them. A project that departs from or takes for granted the existence of otherness as a meaningful, let alone stable, category thus faces an immediate challenge in its rationale, namely how to discursively probe otherness without invoking all the hidden dimensions of the word and, more difficult still, contending with what remains of the appellation of otherness outside (or rather beyond) its innumerable ideological appropriations.

Alterity, that is otherness as all that is opposite to or not 'selfsame', is an essential component within the philosophical tradition of German Idealism, especially in the work of Georg Wilhelm Hegel and later the phenomenological ideations of Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Hegel's dialectic considered otherness a part of awareness necessary both to the self's realization and sustained constitution of itself; i.e. for the *I* of self-consciousness to identify itself and with itself, it needs an other to continually demark its own phenomenal boundaries. Husserl imagined the other as a kind of *alter ego*, in ordinary language, myself were I in the other's place, in an intersubjective, symbiotic relationship with my 'self' as transcendental ego. For Levinas, meanwhile, the relationship with the other is the beginning of ethics, a *metaphysical encounter*—beginning with the appearance of other's *face*—which compels the self away from dominance and toward justice.

Phenomenological alterity exists *a priori*, in the space 'before' identification with *I* and (therefore) also before the many social relationships that comprise identity. This definition of otherness thus by its very nature pre-empts notions of collectivism; the other whom the self encounters in metaphysical relation is not, so to speak, a social quantity, in that the other cannot be 'reduced' to a set of coordinates that

are definable or repeatable outside of each experience. This sharply juxtaposes alterity in phenomenological discourse against views of otherness which imagine it as a sociopolitical (or historical etc.) category.

The latter, by taking into account the ontological (i.e. that which is not strictly experiential) *already presupposes* the other as a distinct convergence of social relationships which—on the basis of identity—either belongs to a collective or else is excluded from it. The other of postcolonial scholarship, Orientalism for example, is a figure created by the interaction of societies, cognisant of historical exploitation and defined by bringing to bear the weight and deep currents of historical, racial and ethnological ‘othering’, data that is in a formal sense secondary to the phenomenal experience of alterity.¹ The ‘referring’ of the self/ other as exemplifying (or being represented by) a proxy separates the postcolonial other from the phenomenological, while also (thereby) opening up problems of representation and essentialism.

Still, significant areas of interaction and intersection exist between these separate paradigms. Frantz Fanon’s critical

¹ Simone Drichel explains the insistence on the other as a singular, unrepeatable being in Levinas thusly: “Just as he never proposes maxims for a collectivity of ethical subjects, Levinas never talks of the other as a collective term uniting groups of people on the basis of shared class or other affiliations. He is adamant that this otherness is always singular rather than collective otherness. In fact, he is known to be highly suspicious of any notion of collectivity and its inherent assumptions of community, dismissing it, as he does, on the grounds that it is tied to the language of ontology” (23-24).

race discourse is equally a psychoanalysis and phenomenology of race. For Fanon, the subjugation of colonized peoples is enacted within consciousness *and* in bodily experience; self-awareness (of one's own body) is formed and sustained through the internalization of racial inferiority, and is thus inseparable from basic, lived experience. Fanon cites W.E.B Du Bois' 'double consciousness' as a fundamental alienation of black self-consciousness from itself, that is, an association of oneself as other for the other. When in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon writes that "the colonized...becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18), the 'becoming' he refers to is in phenomenological as well as material (and social) relations with the world.

Edward Said's influential *Orientalism* (1978) considered the act of academic knowledge production about the 'east' to be a consolidation of the European exercise of power, a casting of the 'gaze' of ontology—which confers power—over the other. Yet the European subject, the bearer of this Occidental gaze, is itself a dialectical product of this othering, i.e. not a being antecedent or independent of Orientalism but contingent precisely on that imaginary duality. As Said puts it:

"[Orientalism is a] major component in European culture... There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental

backwardness...In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7).

Myriad other views of otherness exist, of course, related and unrelated to these. In Michel Foucault's terms, othering is a result of the exercise of institutional, societal and political power, whose gaze and capacity to define structures of normativity create the systematic disenfranchisement of the other. Simone de Beauvoir cognized a female other as the negative opposite of normative male (patriarchal) subjectivity. What is meant by 'other' is, in short, frequently changeable across ontologies that ostensibly do not lie adjacent to each other, so that the etymology of the word itself is fundamentally unreliable.

The rationale for my approach relies heavily on the premise that art, as reality's "shadow"², is intentionally and materially unlike ontological systems and nomenclatures. By animating a facsimile or shade of the 'real', art's primary invention is in a sense the opposite of analysis or appraisal: to obscure and even conceal the real rather than demystify and annotate it. I

² Levinas writes: "Does not the commerce with the obscure, as a totally independent ontological event, describe categories irreducible to those of cognition?...Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms...art does not belong to the order of revelation" ("Reality and its Shadow" 132).

juxtapose theory against art on the basis of the epistemic violence of the former vs the latter's (desired) inscrutability, i.e. its capacity to invoke that which it does not necessarily also essentialize. My broader claim throughout this project is, in brief, that the other, whether described as individual or belonging to a collective, and otherness as a phenomenological, psychic or rhetorical category, is nonetheless *as a basic unit* irreducible to reference or signification, an insight that art uniquely realizes.

'Art' itself being a widely contested moniker and category is a debate I also by necessity take up in part herein, as well as the interaction and delineations between forms and methods. I focus primarily on contemporary literature, 'western' and 'eastern'³, as the primary currency of this dissertation. My reading of these texts deliberately does not take on a singular critical posture. While not ignoring biographical and contextual details, I primarily attempt an interdisciplinary reader-response approach which emphasizes the theme of otherness/alterity, both within the texts and in conversation with others. This methodology does not posit or privilege literature as

³ I have included as well texts that problematize this synthetic binary, works "in between" and along the bluntly serrated border between these geographic regions and some that resist categorization altogether, in no small part so as to challenge their thuswise allocation. A text like Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), for instance, can be read as an existential experience of the other or in a postcolonial literary conversation with Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (2015) which inverts the former's narrative, each reading partial but revelatory.

necessarily preeminent among the arts; the texts I include are generally either explicit investigations of the other or are otherwise tied together by shared imagery, symbols and incarnations of otherness. Alongside a reading of novels, I call attention to literature's limitations as compared with music, painting, etc., in order to open up a wider conversation about art as a venue for, and (in the final chapter) possibly an *instance* of, radical alterity.

My chosen title, Art and Otherness: Tragic Visions in Modern Literature, seeks to indicate these concerns and methods of inquiry. At its core, this thesis' contribution is to consider art and the other alongside each other and then to examine the consequences of overrunning the delineation between them as separate modes of experience. I choose to highlight 'tragic' to foreshadow the results (often catastrophic) of the encounter with otherness in most of the texts included herein as well as to hint at the always precarious nature of the 'ethical' encounter in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, which features prominently throughout these pages. The word 'visions' deliberately foregrounds the always ephemeral and experiential (i.e. not reflective) nature of the 'artistic moment', a line of argumentation I develop mainly through phenomenology. Though I include a wider discussion of art and aesthetics, I engage primarily with literature to investigate the relationship

between language and the experience of otherness, specifically the former's capacity (or lack thereof) to describe, that is, to signify the latter. Finally, I use the 'modern' qualifier to proffer that although the big questions I take up here are of course not *inventions* of modernity, they are nonetheless both especially imminent to and perhaps uniquely refracted by the lens of the 'modern'. Though I do not suggest a progression or continuity in the texts I explore and their relationship to these queries, they are therefore principally from the last two centuries. Modernist literature in particular provides a key frame of reference, being situated at a point of critical mass with regard to historical movements in art, colonialism, the sacred and the secular etc. and the (self-reflexive) questioning of these. To the extent that these preoccupations can be ascribed at all to 'modernity', I follow a very loose chronology toward and into the twenty-first century.

This dissertation includes four chapters. Chapter one cites Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) alongside the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' concepts of an "ethical" and metaphysical relationship with the other within the *il y a*, the primordial darkness which both reveals and constitutes alterity. Chapter two explores concepts of simultaneity, 'non-authoritative' language and hybridity in

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), Salman Rushdie's short story "The Courter" (1994) and Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) through critical work by Homi Bhabha, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Maurice Blanchot. Chapter three poses Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (2015) Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) and Immanuel Kant's schema of the sublime as instances where the other represents a challenge to the transcendental epistemology of the self. Finally, chapter four employs Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2012), Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet" (1844) and art theorists including Viktor Shklovsky, Monroe Beardsley and Arthur C. Danto to ask what the relationship of art is to everyday experience as itself an expression of alterity.

My chapters are each organized around a context or perspective from which to consider otherness, components that fit together but do not constitute in any sense a 'full' view of the subject. Each chapter takes the basic form of exploring a specific realization within a literary work which is expounded and developed through its interplay with other texts. I largely align chapters around the texts themselves (rather than around critical analysis in which the literary works would play a secondary role). Themes and chapters are intended to be cross-

referential and at times (though not always) complementary. The selection and deployment of the theoretical/ interpretive sources I utilize is similarly pluralistic, with the aim of eschewing theoretical grids to 'explain' a particular text. Often, this means the conflict between varying ideologies is one of opposing (internally defined) vernaculars rather than of 'like' terms (i.e. of apples to apples). I therefore attempt to include critical discourses which flow not only in contrary but also parallel motion, i.e. where they do not contradict so much as bypass each other entirely. Here, I claim, the rationale for the intervention of art is most evident, since (as I will discuss) art probes these very contested spaces, in which the instability of the other as an epistemological and rhetorical category may be revealed. This 'other', sought thusly through echolocation (rather than through concentric circles of increasing precision) resembles the ephemerality of an artwork.

The first chapter, which reads Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) alongside E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), appropriately begins these reflections with Conrad's eponymous darkness.

Things that happen in the dark

When he began writing *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, Joseph Conrad had been eight years home from the 1890 British trading mission up the Congo River that inspired the novel. Still a relatively young man, he had—mainly for the sake of his health—already taken his last major voyage in 1893 and spent his remaining years writing and reflecting on his youth abroad and at sea. His life was thus separated into two roughly equal halves, one tempestuous, the other ruminative, his time in the British Merchant Navy informing much of his writing as an older man. *Heart of Darkness*' Captain Charles Marlow is based in large part on Conrad himself, or rather, a version of himself as Conrad the writer, recently married and a new father living in England, remembered Conrad the wanderer sailing on the Congo, into the darkness. In a 1917 author's note to the 1898 short story "Youth: A Narrative", (also narrated by Marlow), Conrad writes movingly of his relationship with the character who was

both a memory and a shade of himself:

[t]he man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened. For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other. (3-4)

Heart of Darkness is to a degree then not only Conrad retracing his steps (or sails, rather), but also reliving an incarnation of himself frozen in a moment of emotional significance, a trauma perhaps, which bridged the two halves of his extraordinary life. Though he would base much of *Heart of Darkness* (and its successors) on meticulous travel journals he kept from his voyages, I believe the presence of his older self alongside Marlow, listening, observing, recording, is also perceptible throughout the novel. This is perhaps one answer to the identity of the unknown frame narrator who hears Marlow's story; Conrad is effectively relating the story to himself, the

sailor speaking to the writer.⁴

What is this experience then that gave Marlow his symbolic nascence as Conrad's fictional counterpart? *Heart of Darkness* is replete with possible traumatic births. While the writer had time to let his time on the Congo gestate in his own mind, his younger self experiences the events of the story in all their traumatic immediacy and urgency. Marlow is, by the end of the novel, almost as compromised and haunted as Kurtz. Consider his reaction in the moments after lying to Kurtz's fiancé about the dying man's last words. The enormity of the lie crushes him, as he tells the narrator:

It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether... (92)

The novel ends with the narrator considering these words, as he looks "into the heart of an immense darkness."

I am inclined here to probe the nature of this moment, the

⁴ See Adam Hochschild's extensive exploration (in the "Meeting Mr. Kurtz" chapter from his book *King Leopold's Ghost*) of Conrad's excursion on the Congo River and its many parallels to Marlow's journey.

vertigo Marlow seems to feel on the precipice of darkness, and the meaning of this rhetorical darkness itself. The question has naturally been widely asked and answered, the most frequent interpretations being a version either of spiritual⁵ or psychic darkness (the "horror") or the opposition between the rational, post Enlightenment "light" of European colonialism and the unknown gloom of the new colonies⁶. Less charitable critics, like Chinua Achebe, have denounced the latter binary for being a deeply exploitative rendering of the Congolese as a mere backdrop, "props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (789). Ian Watt's 'impressionist' reading of Conrad's darkness explores the novel's deep metaphysical, perhaps mystical, vein (185), noting the author's own comment on his work (in an 1897 letter) about trying to "get through the veil of details at the essence of life" (*Collected Letters*, 334).

Still, *Heart of Darkness* by and large keeps its secrets to itself (aptly) about what exactly Marlow (and Conrad) encounter in the darkness. Marlow and Kurtz spend the novel's most important moments together, searching the dark for something it

⁵ Albert J. Guerard wrote in 1958, for instance: "The insistence on darkness, finally, and quite apart from ethical or mythical overtone, seems a right one for this extremely personal statement...may it not also be connected, through one of the spirit's multiple disguises, with a radical fear of death, that other darkness?" (335).

⁶ Most notably, Edward Said's reading in "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*", in which he notes the tension between the novel's imperialist "aesthetics" and Conrad's "self-conscious" and ambivalent posture towards imperialism (22-24).

never surrenders. At one point, Kurtz abruptly tells Marlow: "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death," (83) but never states what the darkness is made of, or why indeed death must be met in the dark. Marlow's last memory of Kurtz, as he is about to deliver his message to Kurtz's fiancé, is similarly 'enshrouded', alternating images of Kurtz swallowing and being swallowed by the darkness:

I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshipers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness. (87-88)

Whatever else this passage may mean, it does evoke a peculiar anxiety, a tension between conquering and being conquered, as if there is in darkness some secret struggle which disappears by light. When Marlow leaves the jungle after Kurtz's death, he is

greatly changed by this conflict which, critically, he describes not as an education—as some acquired wisdom to annex to his person—but rather as an unknowing, an unlearning of something false: “They were intruders,” he says of the people he observes in Brussels upon his return, “whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” (85). It is, in other words, as if Marlow leaves behind some part of his former nature in the jungle, and that returning and belonging to the world afterward (as Conrad may have felt in his own life after his last voyage) requires a sustained belief in something the “darkness” had shown to be an artifice, an illusion. On the Congo River in the jungle, both Marlow and Conrad find a kind of second birth, a space where the writer and his avatar decussate, the serrated edge between sailor and novelist.

The analogy of an impenetrable and transforming darkness does of course occur frequently in the nineteenth and twentieth century European literary canon, paralleling European colonial adventures. As in Conrad, these occurrences are tempting to read as a rendering of Orientalist dread or as a critique of it, and it is certainly appropriate to interpret them that way. My interest though, lies in the darkness metaphor and its deployment, as well its aspects in an intertextual reading.

Like *Heart of Darkness*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

(1924) centers on a material conduit between the colonialist (known) world and the colonies (unknown). The particulars in *Passage* are different, of course; Congo's place is taken by colonial India and the Congo River is swapped for the titular "passage", the allegorically rich Marabar cave system in which the novel's key moments occur. Darkness, however, seems to haunt Forster's novel equally. As with Kurtz and Marlow's conversations, *Passage's* enduring question is the ambiguity of exactly what occurs in the Marabar caves and on whose account. Adela Quested, the young British woman visiting India, accuses Doctor Aziz, her Indian companion, of sexually assaulting her in the caves but later recants after claiming that she was confused and distressed by a mysterious "echo" in the darkness. Like Conrad's "horror", Forster's echo is complex, a kind of symbolic key without an obvious lock to match. And like Marlow leaving the river, Adela and her prospective mother-in-law Mrs. Moore leave the caves haunted by what they learned (or unlearned) in the darkness. When Marlow returns to Brussels only to find a grating "pretence", he resembles Mrs. Moore's extreme disillusionment before leaving India for London, her faith somehow shaken by the echo in the caves, "Her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race" (187).

Mrs. Moore's disorientation and disillusionment in India

cannot be treated separately from her Anglican roots and devoutness, which significantly inform the identity she carries into the Marabar caves. The caves, as Sunil Kumar Sarker has observed, reveal to her an ancient and "supra-sensuous" (344) mysticism, a counterpoint to the conservative "Northamptonshire church where she had worshipped" (Forster 242). Her preparedness (or lack thereof) for this experience is foreshadowed in the text before the incident in the caves, when she extols to Ronny (her son and Adela's fiancé) the limitlessness of universal Christian love, the message of God whose reach extends into the deepest darkness: "'God...is...love...God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India" (46). The caves, in their darkness and indifference, represent a stark delimitation to this notion which severely shakes her faith. What could explain this similarly misanthropic, even nihilistic turn in the two characters? What do Marlow and Mrs. Moore find (or lose) in the darkness that makes life afterwards feel so false?

The echo is in many ways *Passage's* central pillar. Forster describes the sound as somehow both subsuming and formless, swallowing all other sounds while also hollowing them out:

The echo in a Marabar cave...is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until

it is absorbed into the roof. 'Bourn' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum,' or 'ou-boum'—utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'bourn'. (137)

Like the jungle becomes Africa for Marlow, for Mrs. Moore the caves come to define India; later, as she leaves for England, she imagines coconut palms in Asirgarh mocking her, "So you thought the echo was India; you took the Marabar caves as final?" (198), as though the land itself is rebuking this thought. The sound of this rebuke for Mrs. Moore, like Kurtz's "horror" for Marlow, is the "ou-boum" echo. In a sense, both sounds can be interpreted as the opposite of the Word, an unmaking of the world, or (alternatively) of the "light", i.e. of European reason and curiosity. The echo negates speech, reason, ontology and faith, claiming supremacy and primacy over all of these.

As has been explored by several critics, "ou-boum" suggests, phonetically, an antithesis to the sacred Sanskrit incantation "ॐ (Aum/Oum/Om)". As Jeane Noordhoff Olson writes in her book on Forster, "The sound of the echo...as Forster transliterates it is not quite the three-syllable mantra-'a-u-m-' or 'o-u-m'—often chanted in Hindu worship...Indeed, Forster's interpretation seems

a deliberate devaluation of that holy sound, a primal scream that only confirms the absence of any kind of god or spiritual comfort for Mrs. Moore" (163). Where ॐ (Aum/Oum/Om), the Sanskrit syllable of worship, refers to an immutable, encompassing all-ness, "ou-boum" seems, at least ostensibly, to refer to a maw, an imminent nothingness, the sound of an event horizon. Mrs. Moore emerges from the confrontation with this imminence with a sense of spiritual evisceration. Syed Anwarul Huq observes, "the monotonous echo is taken by Mrs. Moore to be a devaluation of life and her own beliefs in Christianity. In India, her relationship to her Christian God has altered in a manner that has traded presence for absence" (36).

Yet, while compelling, this too closely resembles conventional readings of *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India*, i.e. either that the message of Forster's caves and Kurtz's horror is (more or less) that the project of European civilization somehow shrivels (or is revealed as a pretence or artifice) before an impenetrable and eternal Oriental gloom, or that Marlow and Mrs. Moore experience in their encounter with this Old World darkness an existential disorientation that mirrors that of Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism. I believe, however, that there is a relatively distant variant of these interpretations in both

texts that opens up a more metatextual and less oppositional reading.

I contend that what Mrs. Moore and Marlow find in the darkness is not an ancient indifference to European reason, but rather an unspecific, unassumable *infiniteness*, a loss of individual identity and subjectivity which neither is able to withstand. Consider, for a start, the almost supernatural powers (indeed, ostensibly of negation) that Forster confers to the echo as well as the language he uses to describe its effect on Mrs. Moore:

The echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—"ou-bourn." If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff—it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. (139)

The recurrent image Forster deploys to describe the echo is the last one in this passage, a kind of devouring serpent that indiscriminately swallows all intonation and intention, rendering them indistinguishable. Elsewhere, Forster uses "worm" instead of serpent (137; 196), perhaps meaning to invoke both the primitive *and* the supernatural, the 'wyrn' of various European/ Norse traditions. The serpent/worm feeds on sounds, subsuming them into itself, but in doing so it does not destroy sounds but rather envelopes and composes them, into a kind of infinite chorus: "...if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently" (137). The resulting ou-boum is thus *both* all sounds and no sound, ॐ (Aum/Oum/Om) and nothingness, echo and silence.

The serpent of course is a multifaceted symbol. Forster does make a passing but significant allusion to Genesis, to a kind of primeval malevolence that speaks through the echo: "What had spoken to [Mrs. Moore] in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity—the undying worm itself" (196). The Satanic reference in this passage and Mrs.

Moore's subsequent loss of faith after coming in contact with an enduring, ancient power—in a British colony at that—are tempting to interpret as a parable, perhaps an allegory for European Great War disillusionment. It also again opens *Passage* up to Orientalist understandings, in much the same way as "horror" can be read as an expression of being overcome by the impermeability of the Old World. I believe however that the serpent (like the echo it produces) is a more complex symbol, an indirect refrain of Conrad's primal darkness in which unseen struggles occur.

The dual nature of the Marabar serpent, its ability to contain within itself inherent contradictions, anarchic noises and disharmonious voices and to assimilate them into a greater, self-sustaining whole is at least as reminiscent of ouroboros, the pan cultural mythological serpent eating its own tail as a symbol of both infinite cyclicity and of the 'completeness' and self-sustenance of the universe,⁷ as it is of the snake of Genesis⁸. The ouroboros is suggested both by the "snakes within snakes" description, and by "undying worm", which both swallows

⁷ The Norse sea serpent Jörmungandr, for example, enrings the world while gripping its own tail and will begin Ragnarök—the cataclysmic death of the present world—by releasing it.

⁸ One might find closer Biblical parallels to the 'wyrn' toward which Forster may be pointing in the great sea serpents that either precipitated Creation or else threatened humankind and the Created world with a collapse back into (often diluvial) chaos. The Book of Job includes a "Leviathan", possibly a rendering of the earlier Canaanite *Lotan* or the Babylonian *Tiamat*, the primordial god of chaos. The sea dragon/ serpent *Rahab* referenced in Isaiah 51 and recurring frequently in the Psalms is likely to be of particular interest, possibly representing Egypt during the exodus and/ or the primeval serpent vanquished by Yahweh to bring forth the universe from its chaotic preform (see Job 26:12, "He stirreth up the sea with His power, and by His understanding He smiteth through Rahab").

sound and produces echo in a feedback loop (the cycle of birth and death and rebirth).

This evocation is, to my mind, a bridge between Conrad and Forster; the snake that swallows all utterances into its own body is a materialized incarnation of the darkness that haunts Marlow and Kurtz. It is the means of nullifying differentiation, of returning things to their original, formless state—in primordality, within the body of the ouroboros.⁹ This is not, critically, interchangeable with the darkness of Orientalist imagination, the gloom of some distant, antedental world; it is rather the darkness that contains infinities, a precognitive, primordial soup from which nothing is excluded nor possesses tangible form (or a distinct voice). Is this the “horror” then? The experience of the self being first unmade and then assimilated into the darkness, into the body of the serpent?

The preternatural darkness here is also a clear echo of Genesis 1:2,¹⁰ i.e. a place not of bodies interacting, but rather space *before* individuation, a metaphysical abyss opened up by the very encounter with otherness disembodied where otherness itself is the original adversary. Carl Jung wrote of the

⁹ In psychoanalytic terms, this returning to an ‘undifferentiated’ state recalls Julia Kristeva’s distinction between the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* stages in early childhood. The latter, Kristeva’s term for the state of consciousness before it recognizes itself as a singular “speaking subject” (through the repressive intervention of identity, language, socialization etc.) is associated not coincidentally with instinct rather than reason, and with a sort of prelingual indistinctness of subjectivity. See Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* (1980).

¹⁰ “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

ouroboros as a symbol of the unconscious (and unresolved) struggle between the self, with its own internal contradictions, and its symbolic "shadow", i.e. a resolution or synthesis of the self and the not-self. Writes Jung:

In the age-old image of the uroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process...[t]he uroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., of the shadow. This 'feed-back' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality, since it is said of the uroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolizes the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the prima materia which, as a projection, unquestionably stems from man's unconscious. (365)

Forster's undying worm appears to bear many of these characteristics. To return to the distinction between Aum̐ and "ou-boum" for a moment, the worm as ouroboros suggests that the difference between the two sounds is akin to the difference between the Sanskrit Ātman and Anātman, literally 'self' / 'soul' and 'non-self'. Where Aum̐ evokes the Hindu concept of Ātman, the individual manifestation of universal Brahma consciousness of which the self is an expression, "ou-boum" can be understood as

the Anātman, the opposite, an indication of the Buddhist concept of the non-self/ non-distinction of the self—more succinctly, a resonating of an emptiness rather than a presence. In this sense, “ou-boum” is the inverse of Aum, not the sound of the self realizing its place in a transcendent ‘all’, but rather an evacuation of self and an assimilation into a consuming emptiness (or darkness)¹¹, as in a “snake composed of small snakes.” This is the emptiness, I claim, that Marlow and Mrs. Moore encounter in the darkness, not merely the fear of the alien or inhuman other, but rather the abyss of “ou-boum”, the dissolution—phenomenological and metaphysical—of the separateness of the self and the other as subjects.

How can we understand this “abyss”, what are its contours, what can we meaningfully say about its relationship to the other, to literature or to art? Answering these questions requires first a consideration of the basic coordinates of ‘otherness’ and encountering it, which are of course themselves the subjects of innumerable modes of theoretical explication. While the other is a meaningful epistemological category in various ontologies (post-colonial, psychoanalytical, gender studies, phenomenological from Husserlian to Hegelian etc.), the self confirming nature of each system means that it is nowise

¹¹ That these two principles resemble each other in their opposition *to* each other is of course, not coincidental, and may indeed be the underlying point.

obvious which description is superlative or even contextually preferable. It also is difficult to read across these traditions without misapplying the lessons of one to the other. Moreover, it is debatable whether the 'other' is in any way a stable or useful category outside of its identification and deployment as a category in one of these (or any other) ontological/rhetorical systems. One might ask, indeed, whether otherness is contingent on the application of a discourse to define its parameters and limitations, and if so, how useful it is as a category in cross disciplinary work, or as a term in literary criticism, for instance.

Further, why literature, why art? That is, to what extent is art, by its very nature, distinct from these ontologies that define otherness within their own vernaculars, if it is at all? Put simply, does art somehow approach or define otherness in a way in which the darkness—the "abyss" of metaphysical crisis—is revealed to us more starkly to peer into and if so, how and why?

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once wrote of art that at its most basic, it is a kind of stencil image, a facsimile or shadow of the living world that differs from ontological analysis (art criticism, for instance) in one crucial way: where theoretical interpretations of events or objects attempt to describe or "reach out" for the referent phenomena, art (the "image") performs a substitution, swapping

for the object its impression, for an idea its signifier, for a moment its memory. This substitution makes an artwork a kind of double, resembling to varying degrees the object of its inspiration but being otherwise free to change or even reject any (and every) aspect or "truth" that lies in the source—which Levinas sees as a perverse freedom. In "Reality and Its Shadow", he writes, "a concept is the object grasped, the intelligible object. Already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. The image neutralizes this real relationship...The well-known disinterestedness of artistic vision, which the current aesthetic analysis stops with, signifies above all a blindness to concepts" (132). Art is thus inherently caricature, as Levinas calls it, "something inhuman and monstrous" (141). The rendering of an object by an artist is a comment on the object, a parody, rather than the object re-embodied by the artist's hand.

German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, whose work significantly influenced Levinas, similarly distinguished the intentionality he called "image consciousness" (the "intending" that is directed in looking specifically at an image or artwork) as unique and separate from other perception. Image consciousness, Husserl claims, creates a fundamental conflict in perception because, while the artwork itself is present, its

subject is usually not. The image is, as Husserl puts it, an "appearance of a not now *in the now*" (51), and our intentionality towards it is therefore towards a physical object which depicts a scene that appears as present but which we know to be absent. Perceiving the image is thus a sort of grasping at empty air, an intending that "bears within itself the characteristic of *unreality, of conflict with the actual present*." The image, Husserl declares, appears as a "nullity that does indeed appear but is [actually] nothing."

Though Levinas considered this absence or "freedom" to be a great failure of art (in that it allows it to exist and to indulge exclusively in a space divorced from the 'real world'), I consider this same observation to be the key not only to redeeming art, ironically, through Levinas' own phenomenological ethics, but also to the relationship between art and the aforementioned abyss from Conrad and Forster. The latter, I claim, is informed by this very same material divorce (i.e. the symbolic from the real) of the artwork from *object*, which thwarts its cooption into a particular, self-referential epistemology.

Overly simplified, Levinas' critique of art is primarily that its detachment from the represented object effectively removes the artwork from the world and creates what he calls "the indelible seal of artistic production" (131), a seal which—once

applied by the artist to the finished artwork—forecloses it to any definitive explication or demystification through critical analysis. The ‘finished’ image of the object once rendered, becomes unassailable not only to critics but even to the artist who produces it, who after the moment of intuitive inspiration that produced the work concludes becomes merely a part of the interested public. All analysis and commentary on the work thus does not add to it but merely narrates it in an attempt to restore it to a place in the world. The ineffability of the work itself, as well as the interstice—the netherworld *between* the real object and the one in which the artwork lives—is meanwhile (and forever) inaccessible to everyone, including the artist. Levinas argues that this view of criticism and analysis, as a superfluous exercise that leads a “parasitic existence” upon the body of art, is not just uncharitable, it is entirely misplaced. Not only is criticism far from a vain attempt to interpret the inviolable sublimity of the artwork, he argues, it is the only redemption available to art, the sole means of returning and assimilating “the inhuman work of the artist into the human world” (142), “...the intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind” (131).

Levinas’ claim is that art needs a critical ontology (and presumably an ethics) to ‘redeem’ it, to give it a functional

purpose by returning it from a world resembling reality to the actual world, from ideal back to real. His suspicion—well founded—seems to be that, left alone (or perhaps, even if exhaustively scrutinized), the true purpose of art is not to illuminate the world but to intentionally obfuscate it, to conceal it behind its representation, its substitution. One might of course consider this to be art's great intuition, but Levinas argues that obfuscation is not an act of transcendence or of immortalization (as the artist might claim), but rather a way to dismember the object *irrevocably*. He is most troubled by the elevation of this purpose, which inarguably comes at a great cost:

Is to disengage oneself from the world always to go beyond, toward the region of Platonic ideas and toward the eternal which towers above the world? Can one not speak of a disengagement on the hither side...Does not the function of art lie in not understanding? Does not obscurity provide it with its very element and a completion *sui generis*, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the very obscurity of the real? (131)

Though Levinas asks it sardonically, it is this last question that I find most compelling on its face, namely: what art reveals about reality, what is its relationship with otherness,

and if what is unique about this relationship lies somehow in (contending with) *obscurity*. Pertinent, even essential, to this exploration as well is how artistic representation functions at its most basic level, how it realizes its 'purpose', if one can be identified. Does art, very broadly and simply, attempt to interpret reality, represent it, understand it or obscure it? Does it leave us better educated about its subject(s), or undermine our understanding? Do the answers to any of these questions apply to all art, and if not, what distinguishes 'representative' art from 'destabilizing' art? And, finally, how do we avoid in having this whole conversation the same pitfalls, of (arbitrarily) inventing a methodology that is self-confirming, as with any other discourse that anticipates the answers to its own questions? I approach these problems initially through a more methodical survey of Levinas' constellation.

The basic phenomenological experience of art for Levinas is one of a deep anxiety, even a kind of temporary (and temporal) paralysis, which he attributes to art being essentially an epitaph, what Peter Schmiedgen calls in his reading of Levinas a "death mask" (148) of the object. The image is, in essence, a freeze frame, suspended in the moment of its own creation. "The Mona Lisa will smile eternally", Levinas explains (138); ephemerality conceals the object's past and forecloses its

future, so that the image must remain eternally in the "meanwhile", in the interstices between each moment, unable (like a living instant) to be open to "the salvation of becoming" (141)—which would require a temporal resumption that never comes. By doing so, an image (inadvertently) renounces the possibility of being improved upon, and also therefore any of the possibilities of rational discourse and edification essential to post-Enlightenment thinking. The artist exacts, in a manner of speaking, a revenge on the world of reason, offering not a revealing comment or insight but rather a distortion, an evasion that leaves the world as inscrutable as when he/she first found it, perhaps even more so. "To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture," Levinas charges, "is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace" (141).

Whilst the views he expresses here on art are, in my view, not only unsympathetic but even—as I will argue later in this chapter—contradictory to his *own* approach to the ethical "encounter" with the other, Levinas' laconic analysis does highlight the basic antagonisms between art and criticism (or more broadly, intellectualism). Where the latter, speaking very generally, reaches into the world for comparison and then attempts to contain what it finds in language (through metaphor,

comparison, inference etc.), the insight of art, again very generally, lies not in closing the distance between the referent object and the audience but to increase it and find meaning in doing so. Where criticism describes the object, the image recalls the object's absence. Though slightly reductive, it is arguable that what is made obvious and easily understood tends not to make for very interesting art.¹²

In his book, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben*, Thomas Carl Wall writes: "By substituting an image for the concept, all real relations with the object are neutralized... [The artists'] is a nonconcerning, nonknowing gaze. It does not cross a distance in order to grasp an object as does the hand that labors or the consciousness that seizes the thing in an act of recognition...The image that the artist substitutes for the concept is not another object and does not behave like an object" (13). There is, to summarize, no 'way back' to the object from its image; the true event or source of the artwork's inspiration cannot be reconstituted from its artistic representation, which makes the goal of critical interpretation to understand 'through' art the reality of the object for which it was substituted inherently superfluous, even antagonistic to

¹² I intentionally use "art" here in the broadest possible sense, without the implications brought on by the specification of a particular definition. This approach, I feel, allows for building toward a more refined definition, ideally without any presuppositions. I offer a measure of response to these methodological questions in chapter four.

art. It follows then that art is not the site of reality's purest distillation, whose quality or effectiveness relies on the clarity of the rendering; it is instead the moment of reality's *desertion*. The work of art exists in a kind of negative space, a reverberation of reality from which it is nonetheless materially untethered. This indeed confers on art a kind of perverse freedom from the real, that which Levinas deems an "irresponsibility" (142).

But an irresponsibility to what, we might ask? Theodor Adorno famously wrote "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Prisms 34), the inference being, presumably, that artistic contemplation is an act of insidious privilege, connoisseurship without the burden of accountability (to the real). What makes art monstrous is a disinterest in, even a subversion of, politics and ethics, i.e. looking away from the utility of objects in favor of the aesthetics. Yet, paradoxically, it is also this aspect that is the beginning of insight *especially* as regards that which is obscure in reality. The barbarism of art is both the source and result of evoking the unrepresentable, the 'hither side' of objects. As Henry McDonald has written about Adorno's comment vis-à-vis Levinas: "The alterity of the artwork is double-edged: the barbarism from which it cannot be disassociated is the ground of its transcendent status" (17). The same can be argued about atemporality, what Levinas calls

the "meanwhile". Is not the great redemptive potential of art precisely that it exists in the gaps, the oblique silences left by everyday discourse in its utilitarian rendering of the world? McDonald puts this in terms of art as a resistance to ontologies in their aim to make the world unmysterious: "Art and literature demonstrate a Utopian, emancipatory potential in revealing the fissures and hidden pathways that run through the hegemonic structures and totalizing frameworks of modernity" (16).

As a 'barbaric', atemporal statue, does art thus have some special capacity to disclose that which is concealed, both in everyday experience and from "totalizing frameworks"? What are these obscure aspects, if not mere inventions of the artwork which we retroactively (and wrongly) assign to the object or phenomena? The latter question is a rephrasing, in a sense, of 'what is otherness?' and the nature of encountering it. If art is something other than a "totalizing framework", it follows that in applying such frameworks to otherness *something* (ineffable) is lost which, as I am attempting to claim, can be reclaimed by art.

Because this is not, as I've explained, a thing that can be pointed at directly, I will instead approach it through literature, that is through texts that take up the very question I have posed. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has much to offer on the subject, as an exploration of the anxiety of otherness as

well as one's ethical responsibility *for* the other. I first frame my reading of Shelley's work with a brief summary of Levinas' and Husserl's view (and disagreement) on alterity and ethical responsibility, the same two duelling concerns that doom Victor Frankenstein and which readers of the novel must reconcile.

Levinas' ethics begin at the moment of the face to face encounter with the other, which is the source of his ethical first philosophy. This initial encounter occurs before cognition, i.e. in a moment that precedes individuation, in which the first request the face (of the other) makes of me is: "do not kill me". The nature of this request is not only literal, but also an imperative to resist the will to dominate, to subsume the other within my own consciousness as with a base object. The other, for Levinas, is possessed of a "radical alterity" set apart from the world of objects which can be understood through contemplation, and presents therefore for me an ethical dilemma (whose potential resolutions include murder at one extreme). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' describes the other "as interlocutor, as him over whom I cannot have power, whom I cannot kill" (84). The first demand of the face of the other is therefore toward ethics, not understanding (which closes the distance). Doing justice to the other is to respect his alterity without trying to reduce or negate it. The "ethics"

of this encounter, significantly, are decoupled in Levinas from rational morality, which requires not only reflection and deliberation but also individuation and the desublimation of the primordial, preconscious encounter into bodies (and then identities). What Levinas deems the "epiphany" of the face is that it opens a space for an ethics of radical, primordial alterity that is also pre-rational; it does not impel upon me to uphold a set of social or moral obligations, each of which are naturally predicated on an ontological, not metaphysical relation, and in which "[we] would remain within the idealism of a consciousness of struggle, and not in relationship with the Other" (199).

What is especially unusual about this ethical philosophy is that it is specifically not based on *empathy*, and in fact is theoretically opposed to empathy as a construct. It does not proceed from a recognition of the other's likeness to me or on the other confirming to me my own transcendental ego¹³. Levinas' ethics are explicitly *spontaneous*, and the "justice" that the other's face demands begins with humility, an acknowledgement of the other's phenomenological ineffability, or "infinity": "[t]he strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my

¹³ Whether that transcendental ego is defined as Kantian phenomenal revelation to the transcendent subject ego or the sum of all egos in a universal consciousness or godhead, as implied by Fichte, Berkeley or later by Emerson.

thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics...as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology" (*Totality* 43). This insistence clearly distinguishes Levinas' approach from one based on empathy, identification with the other based on, in common parlance, 'putting oneself in another's shoes'.

It is also therefore quite apart from Husserl's transcendental idealism, which relies on the ego at the center of perception to "intend" the world and the objects in it, to interrogate and constitute their being in the world through the act of perception and directed intentionality, and in so doing to map out the spatial and temporal coordinates of the world shared with the other *who is a variation of the intending ego*. In the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl describes the relationship with the other within the context of his "bracketing" phenomenological approach, in which objects are revealed spontaneously through the experience and intentionality of the perceiver, and the world shared with the other is confirmed by identifying the other as a symbiotic interaction of ego and alterego (both of which intend each other). Husserl describes this interplay as bodies in a state of sustained interdependence, sharing a space whose contours are shaped by a reciprocal intending. The other in his 'ownness' is an ego/body

"as if I were standing over there, where the Other's body is. The body is the same, given to me as the body there, and to him as the body here"" (123).

For Husserl then, the alterity of the other is not "radical" in the same sense, in that it is not truly independent, for the other to appear to me and, conversely, for me to appear to the other as we appear, each must rely on the other's intentionality. The encounter is therefore symmetrical, not an ethical imperative but rather a reduction of the other to my ownness (and for the other, to his) and an assimilation by the ego of its variant, of an alternative expression of itself. "The 'Other'," Husserl writes, "according to his own constituted sense, points to me myself; the other is a 'mirroring' of my own self and yet not a mirroring proper, an analogue of my own self and yet again not an analogue in the usual sense" (94). To be apart from any other object I intend, the other must be seen as bearing some basic *likeness* to me, each of us a variation of the other and neither therefore 'infinitely' other.

It is this specific point of departure from Husserl that makes Levinas' formulation of the ethical encounter especially useful, both for revealing the metaphysical (the "abyss") of otherness and for pointing at the capacity of art to describe the other in this ineffable aspect. In Levinas' ethics, the face

stubbornly resists totalization into any ontological framework, and thus creates a crisis that can only be solved by killing (or otherwise trying to subsume) the other. Randy Friedman explains: "for Levinas, I can never make the other fully present to myself. This is the meaning of alterity... presence, for Levinas, is not achieved by a subject. Levinas's phenomenology of the ethical begins with the inversion of Husserlian intentionality" ("Alterity and Asymmetry"). The ethical imperative of the face in Levinas is not for an exchange between two "I's", two transcendental egos that work to confirm their resemblance to each other. Its request is quite the opposite: for each to remain radically other, on the cusp of understanding but *always beyond it*, so that the encounter is always metaphysical and *prior* to embodiment as "I". The first imperative of the face asks precisely that I not, on the basis of its resemblance to me, affix into my ownness the other as an analogue (as I would an object) or an alternate monad (i.e. me, were I to be embodied as the other). The ethical crisis engendered by the other is to encounter a being whose radical freedom is not in my power to negate, and the obligation to the face, the first ethics, is contingent on this radical alterity remaining absolutely other.

The very other, in fact, of Kurtz's whispered horror. The face differs from other phenomena in a very similar way to the image from the object or event to which it refers. Like the

image, the face is that which is does not bend to understanding; it is the subject of what Levinas calls metaphysical "desire", a wholly other order way of looking and perceiving:

the other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate...I can 'feed' on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire [on the other hand] tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other...it is a desire that can not (sic) be satisfied (33-34).

It is this unsatisfied desire—the state of suspended animation engendered by the dual nature of otherness, at once imminent to me and to my desire to dominate and yet radically, impalpably other—which makes this encounter the center of metaphysical crisis. The other so perceived is at once reassuringly familiar and disturbingly alien, possessing humanity and yet monstrous—as Sigmund Freud describes in *The Uncanny* (1919), both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.¹⁴

The dual impulse, to find in otherness a deep familiarity

¹⁴ The interplay between these opposites is explored later in this chapter.

and simultaneously recoiling from its strangeness, finds articulation perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, whose central motif is the desire and simultaneously the inability of Victor and the creature to 'recognize' each other. *Frankenstein's* inversion of the moment of Creation, in which the creator recoils in horror at his creation, rests largely on the question of the familiar/unfamiliar.

Upon being awoken by the suddenly animated creature, Victor expresses a spontaneous disgust at its appearance: "Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (59). In his essay, "Face, Figure, Physiognomics: Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' and the Moving Image", Scott J. Juengel points out that Victor's description of this encounter ("he was ugly then") belies his declaration just before this moment that he "had selected [the creature's] features as beautiful" (58). Nothing in the creature's appearance changes, save for his animation, to so change Victor's mind. Victor's revulsion at the creature's appearance thus seems not to originate in the creature itself nor in the shock of its birth-

as is the frequent interpretation of the first encounter between the two—but rather is borne, Juengel claims, of a “monstrosity... always already present within Frankenstein's epistemological project, here disclosing itself as an inherent instability in the narrator's discourse...[a]subtle categorical slippage between the body's beauty and deformity” (361).

The “project” in question here goes beyond creation; Victor's decision to assemble the monster from assorted hunks of dead flesh rather than reanimating a single cadaver is expressly not a concession to convenience [“the minuteness of the [disparate] parts formed a great hindrance to my speed,” (54) he admits]. It is rather a necromantic experiment with the ultimate hope of not only reconstituting the discarded hunks into a living being, but also thereby unifying the ineffable with the material world, i.e. enmeshing soul and flesh. Victor's great purpose, to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter” (55), is overtly an attempt to find, in Levinas' terms, a knowable, replicable totality within the infinity of the other—the machine without the ghost so to speak, a being comprised entirely of and disintegrable into basic components assembled with a blueprint.

It is the achievement of this very purpose, I believe, that causes Victor to recoil in horror. The monster though animated and ostensibly possessed of some kind of will nonetheless does not appear (at least to Victor) as a being with true human

interiority. He instinctively does not recognize the creature's features as a true 'face', the frontage of Levinas' ethical imperative. In place of a face, which would distinguish him from object (or monster), the creature's countenance appears to Victor as a mask—i.e. the *absence* of a face—which reveals the workings of its own construction and the mortification imbued in its limbs and lineaments.

Victor's dismay is not, I argue, that the creature is inhuman, but rather that it appears to be only "human", in the sense that it is nothing more than its functionally conjoined human parts, concealing neither a transcendence nor the secrets of its machinelike construction. It is, to cite my earlier discussion about images, as if the obfuscation of the object by its image (the mediating "abyss") has been burned off to fully reveal the object behind it, hideous in its vulgar materialism and over proximity. Victor hints at this very vulgarity in his traumatic first impression of the creature with the comparison to, "a mummy again endued with animation...[with] "muscles and joints...rendered capable of motion." What appears to disturb Victor then is the very success of his project—the creature seems to him both other and yet without discernible subjectivity and thus alterity.¹⁵ He is able to look right through him, as

¹⁵ Or, alternatively, a being without Levinas' "indelible seal of artistic production."

though the creature were a two way mirror.

Further, Victor's description of the creature as possessing an 'excess' ["more hideous than belongs to humanity" (77)] inscribes it as both familiarly human and, simultaneously, obscenely corpselike. In Freudian terms, this contradiction is a primary marker of the *uncanny*. Juengel points out that the creature's distinctive seams and surgical stitches, which call attention to both its assortment of parts and the crisis of interiority engendered by their assemblage, are actually an addition to Shelley's text (which does not mention them at all) made by theatrical and film adaptations. These visual fissures upon the creature's sutured face and limbs are, in my estimation, signifiers of a violent entanglement of the object with its image (of the face with the mask) which results in Victor's experiencing of the uncanny. Of Boris Karloff's iconic portrayal of the creature in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), Juengel writes: "Karloff's pallid sutured countenance presents a borderland, a site of disparity between face and mask, being and seeming, human and monster...Whale's closeups reveal a conspicuously constructed figure, the manifest stitches, seams and folds announcing the face as assemblage, representation, narrative" (354).

Though Shelley's text makes no mention of any obvious markers of this surgical fragmentation, it does clearly describe

Victor's horror at the translucency of the creature's face, which leaves the traces of its inner workings (and thus, of course, of Victor's hand as its creator) just barely visible. Though he again surely knew what the creature looked like before its animation, Victor describes this obscene 'excess' of visual revelation as a new realization once he sees the creature alive, as if there is too little separating the flesh and the visage in a *living* creature: "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath...his watery eyes that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips" (58). The impression of this anemic translucency is repeatedly evoked in the text through imagery of pale or yellow moonlight, which is repeatedly the harbinger of the creature's imminent appearance: "by the dim and yellow light of the moon...I beheld the wretch" (59); "I saw, by the light of the moon, the daemon at the casement" (171); "I felt a kind of panic on seeing the pale yellow light of the moon illuminate the chamber...I saw at the open window a figure the most hideous and abhorred" (200); "Suddenly the broad disk of the moon arose and shone full upon his ghastly and distorted shape" (206). Returning to my point regarding the dual nature of the image as a corollary of Levinas' face, it is as if the creature's face has somehow collapsed into its mask, the visage into its casement, and thus

its subjectivity (if there was such) into its base nature as a material object.

This is the source of Victor's paralysis once the creature comes to life; his creation appears suspended somewhere between material object and ethical subject (or more abstractly, between flesh and spirit). The creature's monstrous appearance is rooted in its unmitigated availability, reflecting what Levinas calls the "collapse [of beings] into their "materiality...terrifyingly present in their destiny, weight and shape" (*Existence* 59-60). Victor actually refers in passing to the creature's oscillation between object and image, and the crisis engendered by looking upon its face to determine which is its true nature: "if he dared again to blast me by his presence I might, with unfailing aim, put an end to the existence of the monstrous image which I had endued with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous" (187). The petrification of the creature between subject and object is grounded in the uncanny. The creature repeatedly reveals itself to both possess human emotion and be highly articulate, only to have its humanity overturned by its epistemically indeterminate countenance which, as Juengel puts it, "stands for and at the dead end of the verbal" (355).

Victor's anxiety thus runs parallel to his guilt as creator. The German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch explains in his essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906)—later referenced by Freud—

the feeling of the uncanny in terms that seem to speak directly to Victor's abiding terror:

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, *doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate* - and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness. (11)

The uncertainly Jentsch describes here, though wide ranging in terms of possible objects, is arguably most applicable to automata, which he discusses almost as if diagnosing Victor's condition directly: "[L]ife-size machines that perform complicated tasks, blow trumpets, dance and so forth, very easily give one a feeling of unease. The finer the mechanism and the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance" (12).

Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" expands on (and at times disagrees with) Jentsch's definition. As is frequently his approach, Freud explores the feeling of uncanniness through the etymology of the term itself. He points out that that the German counterparts to the words canny/uncanny—i.e. *heimlich*/

unheimlich—are provisionally oppositional but not exclusively so; each also *contains* the other within itself. Alongside the primary meaning of *heimlich* (the intimate, familiar or homely), Freud argues that an implied secondary meaning of the intimate is that which is also private and concealed. What is most familiar also contains within it an element of the most secret and the most veiled—and therefore, the most repressed (unknown to the conscious mind). *Heimlich* thus contains, “among its different shades...one which is identical with its opposite, ‘unheimlich’” (223). The opposite term *unheimlich* similarly refers not only to the unfamiliar, unknown or threatening, but also refers us back to its own opposite, i.e. the intimate revealed, the private and secret made frighteningly visible and unhidden (219–225). This, Freud claims, is the source of the anxiety caused by uncanny phenomena: the uncanny reveals a hidden, often fearful aspect *within* the familiar, or an aspect of the familiar that was always present but was unacknowledged. The feeling of the uncanny/ unfamiliar is thus inseparable from the fear of losing one’s hold on what is *most* familiar, since the uncanny makes the familiar, in some aspect of it, *unfamiliar again*.

In this sense, the uncanny is fundamentally destabilizing, as it not only recalls repressed anxieties but also—more significantly for my purposes—casts doubt upon the surety of

what is already known. The effect lies not in the *unheimlich* object itself but in a slipping of the illusion of stability of the *heimlich* (known) world. As a specific iteration of this profound disorientation, Freud raises the figure of the "double", which appearing as a replication of oneself causes one to experience the *heimlich/unheimlich* interpolation specifically as a crisis of the self: "[in the case of the double] the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (233).

Though Jentsch's essay preceded Freud, he poses another aspect of this uneasiness about one's self raised by the double, one that brings us back into dialogue with *Frankenstein*. Among his examples of the phenomena that can give rise to the feeling of uncanniness is a speculation or misapprehension of the inanimate as living (or vice versa). By way of analogy, Jentsch cites the bewilderment that accompanies unexpectedly coming upon an object that reveals itself as a living organism, as in "a tree trunk...that, to the horror of the traveller, suddenly [begins] to move and [shows] itself to be a giant snake" (11). The inverse possibility is equally unsettling, i.e. misperceiving the presence of characteristics of life, as in a shadow that happens to take a humanlike shape, or a machine with

a human voice. Jentsch all but points us in the direction of Frankenstein's creature with his example, "a wild man [who] has his first sight of a locomotive or a steamboat...perhaps at night. The feeling of trepidation will here be very great, for as a consequence of the enigmatic autonomous movement and the regular noises of the machine, reminding him of human breath, the giant apparatus can easily impress the completely ignorant person as a living mass."

This analogy is compelling precisely because the true nature of the automaton remains ambiguous; it bears the markers of a living creature but relies wholly upon comparisons the perceiver makes with the nature of the familiar world to confer to it those living aspects. Taken alongside Freud's analysis of the crisis of the double, I believe this schema responds directly to the key dilemma posed by Shelley's text: the monster (*unheimlich*) who, as his own creation, is also Victor's double (*heimlich*)—with its dual nature as vulgar object and ethical subject—creates a metaphysical crisis of self for Victor, one which takes the form of the aforementioned prelingual, metaphysical encounter with the other.

Victor's predicament is grounded in his inability to determine whether or not the creature is capable of compelling him toward an ethical response ("do not kill me"), which would require Victor to simultaneously renounce his role as the

creature's master and acknowledge, as its creator nonetheless, its demands for just treatment. Victor is thus ensnared in a paradox of responsibility notably similar to the one the artist has to the work of art in Levinas' criticism: in order to quicken the creature's mortified flesh as he intended (i.e. as man, not monster), Victor must forsake ontological mastery—ownership—over it. He must, effectively, become an artist instead of a scientist, confer upon the creature the "the indelible seal" of artistic creation and thereby foreclose it to his own power of discrimination.

Deprived of this gift by his creator, the monster becomes trapped in its very transparency to Victor's ontological queries, as a living incarnation of Victor's latent fears, more double than true antagonist. This is the reason that the creature's quest throughout the text is for agency, to be absolved not only of Victor's fear and guilt but freed also from being an object of epistemological inquiry. The creature never receives this affirmation from Victor, precisely because Victor is unable to perceive the creature as anything other than double, a totalization rather than an infinity.¹⁶ The rejection, which ends in tragedy, impedes completely the creature's ability to achieve the very radical subjectivity that Victor initially

¹⁶ Note that Victor's dread of the creature's inhumanity is at the core of his loathing; the "wretch" is wretched because he is the "daemon" etc.

strived to create and then feared the creature did not possess.

Shelley's text here again seems to precipitate Jentsch, particularly the latter's description of the human inclination to bestow upon inanimate objects or automata recognizable features of life and to then believe in the inherent presence of our projections. As Jentsch explains, being subsequently unable to confirm the veracity of those beliefs then becomes itself the source of fearful uncertainty: "That which man himself semi-consciously projected into things from his own being now begins again to terrify him in those very things, or that he is not always capable of exorcising spirits which were created out of his own head from that very head. This inability thus easily produces the feeling of being threatened by something unknown and incomprehensible..." (14).

This, I argue, is *Frankenstein's* primary axis (resolved ultimately by the death of both creator and creation) and the means by which the novel teases out the ethical dilemma of the other. The monster's role as a symbolic double is a version of the ethical crisis of otherness. Its first monstrous appearance, recalling the initial, hostile appearance of the face in Levinas, is for Victor (both symbolically and actually) an invitation not to destroy it. But Victor fails this test; his denial and condemnation of it makes the creature not the other of Levinas' irresolvable "metaphysical desire", whose face

distinguishes him from the disclosable world of objects, but the other as an analogue of myself (i.e. Victor) whose "alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor" (*Totality* 33-34).

The relationship between Victor and the creature thus presents both possibilities: the other as an object that departs from me and is available to me, and as the opposite, the radical other Levinas describes. We might even say that the encounter with the other is always a version of Victor's first appraisal of the creature upon its animation, compelling one each time to make the same decision Victor must make. If the first imperative the face of the other makes is "do not kill me", perhaps the first question one asks of the other is: are you an object or a doppelgänger imitating me, or actually a being possessing true, radical and independent subjectivity?

Still, it is essential to point out that the doubt that the creature incites begins not within itself but in its creator. *Frankenstein* is at least as concerned with the self as about the other; the creature is monstrous because Victor requires it to be so, since it is a reflection of Victor's doubts about his own true nature, his own subjectivity. The creature's indeterminate otherness undermines the belief Victor has in his fixity as the centre of his own subjectivity. In *Existence and Existents*,

Levinas describes the feeling of dissolution, the losing of one's grip on oneself, as not an incidental effect of otherness but as a coming into contact with the *il y a* (literally, the *there is*)¹⁷. The *il y a* is the counterpart of form, both preceding and transcending; it is being without individuation and chaos within order, a wholeness without either subject or object, running through and looming above these. Using darkness and nightfall's blurring of clear separations between objects as a comparison, Levinas describes perceiving the *il y a* as a shedding of artificial separations (and thus of individuality), a seeping of everything back into its unsorted, indistinguishable form: "indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness. There is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In this ambiguity the menace of pure and simple presence, of the *there is*, takes form. Before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one's shell. One is exposed...What we call the I is itself submerged by the night" (58-59).

This reciprocity of the self and other, exposing each other while both are always on the verge of slipping back into the formless *il y a* is the foundation for what Levinas calls the

¹⁷ Though it stubbornly evades language, the *il y a* may be imagined as a depersonalized allness or Tao-like fabric of all being, alternatively everything and nothingness, distinct but not unrelated to Martin Heidegger's *Dasein* (Being-in-the-world). I engage with this idea as a conclusion to this chapter and again in chapter two.

"hypostasis" or coming together of the self in the first place, and it is this frightening possibility, I argue, which permeates each of Victor's encounters with the creature. The most primal terror evoked by *il y a* is not death, but the loss of selfhood, of distinctness and freedom from the immanent, anonymous *there is*. The creature's appearance as Victor's own apparition incites in Victor the horror of his own dissipating subjectivity (or perhaps, of its fragility), as Levinas deems it, the "horror [of the *il y a*]...which will strip consciousness of its very "subjectivity" (*Existence* 60).

The "horror" of the *il y a* brings us back to Kurtz and to Mrs. Moore and Forster's *ou-boum*. Is there a symbiosis between Kurtz's last words, Mrs. Moore's spiritual dislocation in the Marabar caves and Victor's existential terror? Each seems to be induced by the disquieting revelation or discovery of something concealed, *heimlich* become *unheimlich*. The menacing jungle, the gloom of the cave system and the creature's pallid appearance in the moonlight each seem to manifest the night of Levinas' metaphor, finding particular resonance in actual or metaphorical darkness. And darkness, rather than obscuring what is real or the pellucidity of light, seems instead to disclose what is most intimate, as if belying the artificial separations of the day. I contend that Kurtz's horror and Forster's *ou-boum* are both utterances indicating the imminence of the *il y a*; as if echoing

The Word, each contains within it both the prelingual and the non-lingual. And, as the axis on which each novel pivots, each seems to open into an abyss with neither language nor individuation, a primeval place which bears a deep and substantive resemblance to the *il y a*.

Viewed through this prism, the figures of Victor, Kurtz and Mrs. Moore seem to converge; each approaches the corners of realization unawares, and each realization is too much to be borne or even looked upon directly, dislocating and overwhelming their subjectivities. And, crucially, each character's crisis occurs through confrontation or conversation with the other, literally and symbolically. This last commonality makes an intertextual reading of the novels—as Levinasian encounters with otherness—especially useful, as each character seems to stagger between ethical responsibility towards the other and the consuming *il y a*. The defining moment for each character is a version of the same unnamed (and unnameable) realization: the vertigo of experiencing oneself consumed, falling into the 'abyss'.

In his paper "Beyond the Dialectic: Conrad, Levinas, and the Scene of Recognition" which also reads *Heart of Darkness* through Levinas as a potential 'way out' of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, Ihor Junyk describes Marlow's interaction with Kurtz as an ethical relation, one in which each resists the

temptation to enslave or subsume the other. The Hegelian aspect of Kurtz's character, seeking to dominate the native Congolese, both defines his appearance¹⁸ and is the catalyst for his eventual undoing, when the horror evinced by the native other leaves him emaciated and dying. Junyk reads Marlow's encounter with Kurtz as one that goes "beyond" this dialectic, opening a space for a radical ethics: "Unlike the harlequin, who is entirely under Kurtz's domination, Marlow maintains his distance, irony and autonomy...abandon[ing] the anticipated Hegelian dialectical battle of mastery and slavery. Acknowledging Kurtz's degradation, he assumes radical responsibility for him" (144). The uniqueness of this encounter is, I believe, established by the novel's narrative structure; the circumstances and backdrop against which Marlow and Kurtz meet are richly infused with imagery and metaphors that invoke the 'night' of the *il y a*. Representing the destination at the end of Marlow's journey, *Heart of Darkness* positions Kurtz as the bearer of an undisclosed, one that takes the form of an enigmatic silence to which Marlow is oriented throughout the novel and which that draws him into the darkness. Junyk writes that Marlow's journey is "not only forward in space, but also back in time, to a primordial era...what can only be described as

¹⁸ "I saw him open his mouth wide," Marlow describes, "it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (72).

an archetypal journey into a veritable underworld. The forthcoming encounter with Kurtz, then, is presented, not as an ordinary meeting, but as a primal scene of recognition, a primordial, mythical event" (143). It is in this setting that Marlow, pursuing secret knowledge, discovers Kurtz, who has ostensibly attained it and, like Victor Frankenstein, has been destroyed by it: the realization of the *il y a*, the proverbial heart of darkness.

The novel's silences, evasions and the obliqueness of Kurtz's last words become entirely consistent, from this perspective, with its intention; the origins and characteristics of the "horror" are unnameable precisely because the contours of the *il y a*—like the Tao—exist beyond the purview of language, signification or even comprehension. Junyk rightly decries the misreading of critics of the novel like F.R. Leavis, who bemoans Conrad's rhetorical imprecision as an insistence on "making a virtue of not knowing what he means" (Leavis 180). Like Shelley, Conrad's great revelation must remain a half remembered dream, able to be glimpsed only out of the corner of the eye. The *il y a* can be spoken about (if at all) only by not pointing directly at it. As Junyk argues, this is the methodology by which *Heart of Darkness* "questions and undercuts the picture of a universe with secure coordinates and absolute reference points. What emerges in its stead is the chaotic world (or non-world) of the

'il y a'" (148).

Levinas further associates silence, or at least white noise, with the *il y a*, describing a kind of pregnant, primigenial silence or "rustling" that both contains and nulls all other sound. The 'allness' that the *il y a* represents is analogous, for Levinas, to a "rumbling silence, something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the silence were a noise...a noise returning after every negation of this noise" (*Ethics* 48-49). The similarity to Forster's *ou-boum* and to his metaphor of the primordial "snake composed of small snakes" is intriguing; like Levinas' rumbling silence, the echo that traumatizes Mrs. Moore is both featureless ("entirely devoid of distinction") and impenetrable in its meaninglessness ("whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies"). One might imagine this noise, as a helpful if inexact comparison, as akin to the cosmic microwave background radiation left over from the early universe, a constant hiss beneath all other sound or a canvas upon which all sound exists.

Like Marlow and Kurtz's conversations, Mrs. Moore's exposure to the *il y a* occurs in an utter darkness that erases identity and form, self and other. In darkness, Levinas concludes, the rustling becomes audible again "the whole is open upon us... Darkness does not only modify their contours for vision; it reduces them to undetermined, anonymous being, which sweats in

them... The rustling of the *there is* is horror" (*Existence* 59-60). If this rustling, the *ou-boum*, is the sound of the abyss of the *il y a*, darkness is its corresponding visage, and the other is the bearer of its terrible message.¹⁹

Of course, the prevailing question with regards to these realizations is whether they are unique in any way to these texts, or whether art is an ideal or even appropriate lens through which to arrive at them. I have already discussed, in brief, the basic act of 'substitution' (of an object for its image) at the core of the artistic endeavor which allows art to open up a distance between the object and its artistic rendering, a check against the often totalizing effects of language and description. But what, one is compelled to ask, separates the consideration of otherness in a novel, for instance, from otherwise contemplating the same question? What about the language and discourse of art allows an experience or exposure to "the whole [that] is open to us"? How can one sense the presence or absence of this capacity, and what can one learn (or unlearn) about the other by it?

To develop and respond to these questions, the next chapter presents a reading of several works concerning the nature of literary/ artistic speech and 'non-speech', including texts by

¹⁹ As Michael Fagenblat has put it, "it is the transcendence of the anonymous and/or the divine that is the real and non-ethical source of (ethical) subjectivity (299).

Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Trinh T. Minh ha and others, as well as critical work by Maurice Blanchot, Homi Bhabha, Max van Manen etc. I begin with a discussion of the relationship between the 'second language' of literature and the act of looking 'obliquely'.

"Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth that he might be of those possessing certainty: When the night grew dark upon him he beheld a star. He said: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: I love not things that set."

(107) -The Quran, Surah Al-An'am 6:75-76

Side Eye, or Fun with Words

As a rather ironic exclamation point to his long soliloquy that comprises the final chapter of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), the writer Bernard portentously declares "I have done with phrases" (176). Being a writer and thus most closely associated with the novel's experiments with and expositions on language among the novel's six primary characters, his decision is a weighty one. His plea is answered by the novel's final phrase, "[t]he waves broke on the shore", a non-utterance of white noise that seems, in a sense, to grant him his wish, a sound emptied of purpose or thought. Bernard's exasperation with language is arguably *The Waves'* primary meditation, the inadequacy of language (and signification) to stand in for the real, or as Rhoda, the novel's most Woolf-like character, observes, the "'[l]ike' and 'like' and 'like'" of language

semiotics, "but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?" (95). For Bernard, disenchanted with metaphor, analogy and explanation, "phrases"—in their contemplative seriousness—reveal themselves to be empty signifiers, a vain attempt to stave off death and non-being. "By what name are we to call death?" he asks, "I do not know" (176), hinting both at an ineffable "thing beneath the thing" and at that primordial, chaotic soundscape beyond language, the sound of the titular waves and of Levinas' "rumbling silence".

Perhaps hedging his bet, Bernard does, however, qualify his condemnation somewhat, exempting from his call for a complete annihilation of language a kind of non-speech, a primitive, obtuse speech comprised of monosyllabic fragments: "I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak...I need a howl; a cry...Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes...false phrases. I have done with phrases...What delights me [now] is the confusion" (176; 143). This suggestion, essentially that "phrases" (i.e. language as a means of signification and comparison) are false while spontaneous utterances express the immediacy of the world, is an especially remarkable one for a writer. As critics like Elicia Clements and others have noted, Bernard speaks to Woolf's own long-standing concerns about the limitations of language and its

tempestuous relationship with meaning, the same concerns that inform the experimental structure of *The Waves*, perhaps the most stylized work in her oeuvre. What does Woolf mean here by “howl”, the “little language” of lovers? What distinguishes these from “phrases” and saves them from Bernard’s disdain about the ineffectuality of language? And, moreover, could this “howl” represent a way out of the problems I discussed at the conclusion of chapter one, namely identifying and mapping an artistic ‘second language’ in which the “whole is open to us”?

The emancipatory potential of the “howl” has several antecedents in Woolf’s earlier work, both fiction and non-fiction. Some of these are worth exploring here, as they illuminate both the adjacency of Woolf’s criticism of rhetorical signification to Levinas’ totalizing ‘ontology’ as well the ethical possibilities of what I am tempted to call a pseudo-anarchic language of art.²⁰ *The Waves* notably attempts to replicate, in form, structure and even prose, the compositional structure of a musical piece. Gerald Levin, Elicia Clements and Linda Nicole Blair have noted the novel’s fugal structure

²⁰ Samuel Beckett once expressed a similar sentiment about the seeming falsity of a prepared or varnished speech. In a 1937 letter to the German publisher Axel Kaun, Beckett writes “more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it...[and] drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through” (518). The sentiment compares interestingly with Michael Fagenblat’s notion the *il y a* as “the remainder of life which remains when both being and nothingness have been drained out of it” (300).

(though Levin settles on the term "pantonal"), its six narrators speaking in a kind of affectation of contrapuntal simultaneity that, among other achievements, undermines the monological authority of a single narrator (or truth).

The unifying motif of the novel, repeated intermittently and sequentially by each narrator (as in a fugue) is the inescapable shortcomings of language, that is, its inability to *be* musical. Bernard's final resignation is a stated resolution of this motif, the inadequacy of a 'phrase' to contain within itself its own contradictions and thus to replicate a continuous 'wave'. Levin explains that, by straining the limitations of the novel and mimicking the discordant polyphony of a contrapuntal musical piece, "the implication [of *The Waves*] is that the musical experience is finally one of unresolved dissonances. We have connection without consonance or resolution" (167). Towards the end of the novel Bernard makes this relationship explicit, as if metatextually comparing the narrative of *The Waves* to music:

Faces recur, faces and faces—they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble—Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, as a "[symphonic]

whole ...with its concord and its discord, and its tunes
on top and its complicated bass beneath. (156)

The effect of coalescing these contradictions and collisions, the overlay of melody and discordance, is a 'democratization' of narrative. The novel's prismatic subjectivities allow it to subvert the dictatorial stance of the single narrator choosing a definitive version of events or, more abstractly, a single reality from within the diffuseness of experience. To borrow an esoteric but illuminating metaphor from quantum physics, *The Waves* is an experiment in repacking particles back into quanta, a simultaneity of multiple synchronicities prior to the collapsing of the wave function into a singular, canonical particularity²¹. Mikhail Bakhtin has made a similar observation about Fyodor Dostoevsky's kaleidoscopic narration, a temporal invention that opens up the singular 'event' into its myriad, divergent possibilities and intervals which Bakhtin calls the "interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment" (28). While Woolf and Dostoevsky have little (if anything) else in common as writers, the experiment Bakhtin here cites is a similar 'stretching' out of narrative directionality, revealing interstices and fissures within a single text. In theory, each additional cross-section, like each of the *The Waves*' narrators,

²¹ As in the case of light quanta. See the wave-particle duality, including the work of Niels Bohr.

brings the 'real' event (its many hidden aspects) closer at hand, though—short of an infinite number of cross-sections—it must always remain just out of reach.

Bernard's supplication for an alternate speech, one that survives the trappings of "phrases" and bears a stronger likeness to lived experience²² finds a close consort in Lily Briscoe from 1927's *To the Lighthouse*. Though she approaches the question from the perspective of a painter (the relationship between painting and writing being a frequent subject for Woolf), Lily Briscoe's frustrations with the incongruity between the nameless world beyond the human voice and the ordered cadences of language are quite similar. She notes particularly the flightiness of language when compared with feeling: "[l]ittle words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing...one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low...for how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there?" (240-241). Lily Briscoe's attempt to create a portrait of the Ramsays that captures essence while making "no attempt at likeness" (72) anticipates Bernard's wish for a language without prescription, which does not put "all its feet on the floor"—in

²² That is, the 'distance' between signifier and signified; how one might make this assessment of language is one of several significant issues of interest here.

other words, signification without essentialization. For Lily Briscoe, a painting is freer than a novel, or at least it has the possibility to be. Her painting, like the elusive symbol of the novel's titular lighthouse, leans toward a representation which is not a true likeness, which strains the relationship between signifier and signified. Its relative freedom thus places it somewhere on the figurative bridge from "howl" to the "phrases" that Bernard wants to forsake.²³

Like Bernard, Lily Briscoe's desire for a representation without likeness is a variation on a concern that can be traced back even further, to Woolf's earliest work. Well before the publication of her first novel, Woolf had described the failure of words to express the "emotions of the body", whilst explicitly privileging music as closest amongst of the arts to the "howl". In 1909's "Impressions at Bayreuth", she writes "we are miserably aware how little words can do to render music. When the moment of suspense is over, and the bows actually move across the strings, our definitions are relinquished, and words disappear in our minds" (Essays 291-292). For Woolf, the musical form is closest to the disembodied territory²⁴ where the "thing

²³ I revisit the lighthouse Lily Briscoe's painting in chapter four as part of a different discussion regarding symbols.

²⁴ Arnold Schoenberg elaborates on the intangibility of music in *Theory of Harmony*, i.e. on the distinctness and separateness of sound from the instruments that create it. The sound of a violin, for example, is not the violin itself. The sound that is heard does not materially lead us back to what created it. "[T]he material of

beneath the thing" exists. In 1905's "Street Music", her observation about the ineffability of music and the possibility of 'empty' signifiers, already seems to put her on the path to the musicalization of the novel form which found its eventual realization in *The Waves*. Like Forster's echo, Woolf associates music with a primal scream²⁵, capable of producing a "musical ecstasy": "[the god of music is] the wildest of all the gods, who has not yet learnt to speak with human voice, or to convey to the mind the likeness of human things...[it] incites within us something that is wild and inhuman like itself" (*Essays* 29-30).

A frequent attendee at Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris after the War, Woolf would have been aware of the ongoing insurgence not only against musical conventions but, as the riot-inducing 1913 performance of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* showed, against the conventional definition of 'music'. *The Rite's* subversion of conventional tonality, consonance, rhythm and of musicality itself (along with Vaslav Nijinsky's vulgar choreography which, as Richard Taruskin has written, was the true cause of the 1913 riot) was a progenitor of *The Waves*. Like Woolf, Stravinsky's disruption of acculturated expectations of musicality implicated audiences in their need to find

music is the tone" Schoenberg writes, "what it affects first, the ear. The sensory perception releases [previous] associations and connects tone, ear, and the world of feeling" (19).

familiar signifiers within the music and, more substantially, revealed the 'meaning' behind those signifiers to be conditional rather than universal. In its arrangement, *The Rite* also built on earlier forays into musical simultaneity, in that it played with vertically 'stretching' its internal logic into a diffuse (rather than acute) axiom. Pieter Van Den Toorn writes that in *The Rite*, "symmetrically defined units no longer succeed one another, harmlessly, as they do...in the early Stravinsky passages...These units are now superimposed—played simultaneously...[This] radically alters the conditions of octatonic confinement, opens up a new dimension in octatonic thought" (129). While Den Toorn attributes this "new dimension" in *The Rite* to an alternate (but stable) pattern of interaction between diatonic and octatonic scales, Dmitri Tymoczko challenges this analysis, suggesting that what appear as octatonic moments are actually elements of several non-diatonic scales grafted onto the piece to create a portentous disorder (a companion to Nijinsky's chaotic choreography).

The polyphonic dissonance in *The Rite* is neither an incidental nor an arbitrary variance; the countercurrent of varying scales and opposing melodies forms a 'language' that effectively comprises its own counterpoint or refutation.

²⁵ She refers here to a specific form of rhythmic music which "takes possession of the soul" and in which the "god" is present, quite apart from music of a "facile eloquence", a notable if difficult distinction.

Tymoczko argues that the multilogic of scales in *The Rite* both reveal its composer as "a methodological pluralist, a *bricoleur*" (69) and that the key axis of the piece is its "polyscalarity", "a kind of local heterogeneity, a willful combination of disparate and clashing musical elements...the feature that prompted the Italian composer Alfred Casella (1924) to compare Stravinsky's musical style to the "cubist" technique of Picasso and Braque" (84)²⁶.

Again, like *The Waves*, Stravinsky's overlaying of intersecting scales refract and disperse narrative uniformity, instead constituting, in a sense, another Bakhtinian "cross-section". I interpret this as a sibling of the chaotic 'language' of Woolf's inhuman god of music, a language defined not by its clarity but by its opacity, its polytonality. In *The Rite*, this language presents what Tymoczko describes as "a fundamental challenge to the traditional assumption that a single scale or key area...should govern music at any one time...the very notion of polytonality involves logical incoherence."

Woolf's Modernist contemporaries (and their nineteenth century predecessors), both literary and non-literary, made similar ruminations about and experiments with simultaneity,

²⁶ One is reminded of the collages and three-dimensional 'assemblages' with which the two painters experimented in 1912-1914, even while Stravinsky was composing *The Rite*.

musicality and an 'inhuman' language.²⁷ TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) famously assimilated unallocated voices, affecting both a chronological and logical refraction that assailed the authority of its narrator to disclose the 'truth'. Wayne Chapman notes the Joycean influence and methods in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially Joyce's temporal and synesthetic manipulations in *Ulysses* (Chapman 214), which Sara Danius explains as a intermedial way of escaping (perhaps transcending) the restrictions of a singular media or form, by "incorporating within itself cinematic modalities of the visible and phonographic modalities of the audible...[thereby] bring[ing] various artforms into contiguity with each other" (185).

Similarly, Richard Wagner's desire for a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, raised the possibility of escape or at least partial reprieve from the limited vernacular and semiotic corridors of any one form. The considerable albeit politically contentious legacy of Wagner's early work extended well into the Modernist era (including, of course, its eventual Fascist appropriations); the familiar Modernist allergy to the established conventions of and separations between mediums owed

²⁷ It should be noted, so that we do not mistake these concerns about language and truth as narrow or recent obsessions, that multiperspectivity is by no means a Modernist invention (though it was perhaps cultivated by the Modernists). Epistolary novels had established a version of the device more than a century earlier. Neither are narrative alternatives to monological narrative structure a strictly Western (or literary) reform; traditional Sufi and classical India musical forms like *qawwali* and *thumri*, as early as the 13th and 15th

a debt to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* compositions and the theatres constructed to stage them. Modris Eksteins has skilfully explored in his book *Rites of Spring* how Wagner's total art work drew the arts into a closer, dialogical discourse. The tug against the vernacular hegemony within each individual medium both closed the distance between the arts and destabilized their epistemological foundations. Eksteins explains:

The search for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—for the holy grail that is the "total art form"—was actually a universal one by the end of the nineteenth century. The arts, in part because of the enormous influence of Wagner, had moved steadily toward each other. [Claude] Debussy [for example]...would take a symbolist poem by Mallarme and use it as a basis for a tone painting not dissimilar in effect from impressionism in pictorial art. (25)

Although *The Waves* is a mimesis of musical forms and not truly (that is, literally) synesthetic, its structure and leitmotif are a play on intermediality which recalls Wagner's *die Versmelodie*, the amalgamation of the written/ spoken language with the musical—as Wagner puts it in *Oper und Drama* "[of] absence and presence...the thought with the sensation" ("*der Gedanke mit der Empfindung*") (288). This intermediary

centuries respectively, often expressed the female voice through a male singer. Far earlier still, the *Five Classics* of the Confucian canon channeled a polyphony of voices within its singular edificatory construct.

'language', somehow mediating between word and feeling²⁸ is an intriguing response to Lily Briscoe's question in *Lighthouse*, i.e. the inability to express the "emotions of the body." What *Versmelodie* contemplates is the intertwining of the intellectual with the intuitive, the language of concepts and description with the (non)language of the "howl". Though they bear no great similarity, this is also in principle (and perhaps motivation) the shifting, spontaneous language which Joyce aspires to in *Ulysses*, as Danisus put it, "to transcend the domain of literature, even the domain of art as such, attempting to capture the experience of everyday life in its lived immediacy" (187). Without the façade of deliberation and ornamentation—of "phrases"—a language which embeds sensation within itself has the potential to be stubbornly and profoundly evasive. Like Woolf's wild god of music, the purpose of this 'language' is—to a significant extent—to subvert *itself*.

What runs through all these Modernist experiments with immediate speech, a language that assails language, is that each seems to acknowledge and reach for the 'pure' event, for insight driven by and limited to the unembellished phenomenological experience. In this aspiration, their similarity to Levinas'

²⁸ See in particular Wagner's use of spoken verse and recurring musical leitmotifs in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre* from the Ring operas, a technique seemingly replicated by Woolf in *The Waves* which opens the text to synchronous, 'cross-sectional' reading.

insistence on a "metaphysics [which] precedes ontology" is considerable—each acknowledges the opposing currents of "phrase" and "howl" (*ou-boum*) and steers towards the latter as a more reliable bearer of truth.²⁹ At the heart of this concern is that each affirms the veracity of Bernard's suspicion, the insufficiency of language to contain lived experience. And since (as Hegelian dialectics teaches us), experience begins with what is other, the insinuation therefore is that language is a flawed instrument to describe otherness, without similar essentialization. The "howl", the instinctual language of non-authority therefore works towards driving us *toward* the other, by obscuring and subverting its own edifications. It is this language of *obliqueness* that art proffers as a redemptive possibility. And, far from being an esoteric invention of Modernism, this language is rooted in a theory of perception developed in disparate bodies of literature. Far afield from European Modernism it has been dexterously explored, as one example, in postcolonial writing and post-Oriental critical discourse regarding the other.

²⁹ Levinas' complicated relationship with metaphysics and language is explored extensively by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics" (1967), in which he writes "this unthinkable truth of living experience, to which Levinas returns ceaselessly, cannot possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked, and that what was taken for its solidity is its rigidity" (112). Derrida's main critique of Levinas, that radical alterity cannot be expressed in language and therefore cannot help but be squandered by its own description, is answered by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), a deeply nuanced discussion I will not go into here.

As the opening salvo of her 1982 documentary *Reassemblage*, narrating over shifting images from rural Senegal, author and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha declares: "I do not intend to speak about...just speak nearby." This cryptic thesis resonates throughout the film, which is as much an extended meditation on positionality as about the Senegalese, perhaps more so. Trinh's methodology is to intentionally and self-reflexively undermine and invert the documentary format, blurring the lines between documentary filmmaker of the developing world—as the anonymous voice of traditionally Orientalist authority—and the abject other, the object of study and scrutiny. "A film about what?" she asks more than once, voicing the inevitable question in the audience's mind as fleeting and thematically disconnected scenes depicting tribes and villages seem to fold into each other, some recycled, others out of focus. The cadence of *Reassemblage* is abstention instead of revelation, exhalation instead of speech. Its decontextualized narration and inexact phrases are sharply detached from the images on screen, its long silences starve the viewer of ontological nourishment, a rebellion against what Trinh calls "the eternal commentary that escorts images."

The Senegalese are not explicated or brought closer. No words are spoken that reach out for the other or shorten the distance between us and them. The film's subversion of the traditional

documentary format lies in not understanding; Trinh's antagonist is not the state of unknowing (as for documentarians traditionally), but rather ethnology, which strives to 'know'. "Ethnologists handle a camera the way they handle words," she remarks, "...every single detail is to be recorded...the man on the screen smiles at us while the necklace he wears, the designs of the cloth he puts on, the stool he sits on are objectively commented upon."

The absence of this 'ethnological' voice in *Reassemblage* calls attention to the gaze of the filmmaker while simultaneously obscuring it. What remains in its place is a way of seeing that is defined by its inexactitude, its *obliqueness*. "[R]eality is delicate," Trinh observes, before passingly offering the viewer one of the film's most important insights, to "dull the habit of imposing a meaning on every single sign." Without the aid of descriptive language and precise signifiers, the signified—the other—of Trinh's film remains similarly ephemeral; what phrases the narration offers seem to push us away, disconnecting the other from us and from language. Under this oblique gaze, otherness remains veiled, warily keeping its distance.

As compelling as this invention is for filmmaking, it is nonetheless contingent on its medium, the distance that is, between sight and language. It leaves unresolved the possibility

of a parallel written language, a textual equivalent to this imprecision and silence. Trinh highlights this problem in her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), echoing *Reassemblage's* concerns about speech and totalization. "The real," she writes declaratively, "remains foreclosed from analytic experience, which is an experience of speech" (76). That this is another incarnation/ articulation of Woolf's frustration with the "'like' and 'like' and 'like'" of signification—of phrases—is straightforwardly apparent. But Trinh's rejoinder to this problem is a useful one for the purposes of trying to find an 'ethical' discourse that does justice to the other. She points us in its direction when she describes an "art for art's sake", a resistance to the "bourgeois 'functional' attitude of mind", an art that admits and probes its own "gratuitousness" (15).

The potential of a radical politics of authorship arises when the boundary between the writer and the written is destabilized, distorting the ontologizing gaze of 'author' upon the other. Such writing would seek to erode its own ossifying, hegemonic power, while having as its only rule that the rule itself must be created and uncreated spontaneously. Like filmmaking, writing inherently emerges from an authoritarian posture, which to be thwarted must be consciously and persistently undermined by the writer. "As holder of speech, Trinh explains, "[the writer] usually writes from a position of power, creating as an

"author," situating herself above her work and existing before it, rarely simultaneous with it" (7). A radical discourse that preserves the metaphysical relationship with the other must therefore, at its most fundamental level, subvert its absolute authority to describe and categorize the other. For the alterity of the other to survive the ontological violence of description (of which Levinas warns), it must maintain a posture of self-reflexivity, speaking in a vernacular that is in a constant state of contention.

How might we understand the contours of such a language? Moreover, how might one even inquire after such a language—talk about it—through language, if its whole purpose is to counter the pretensions *of language*? The work of Maurice Blanchot, a contemporary (and close friend) of Levinas, drives toward an answer. Blanchot's literary criticism employs Levinas' *il y a* to develop an aesthetics of an ethical/artistic language. While the conversation between Levinas and Blanchot occurs—figuratively speaking—within the *il y a* (on the basic coordinates of which they agreed), the two theorists diverge significantly when it comes to the possibilities opened up by this space. In his paper "Back to the Other Levinas", building on Alain P. Toumayan's meticulous detailing of the personal and philosophical interaction between Levinas and Blanchot, Michael Fagenblat

observes that while for Levinas, the *il y a* represents the "undetermined menace" (*Existence* 60) of chaos, indistinctness and impersonality, this same *il y a* bears for Blanchot the potential to become "the very space of literature, the occasion when writing betrays its marriage to meaning in search of a life of its own" (301). Where Levinas perceives the *il y a* as an omnipresent threat to the stable world³⁰ to be kept at bay by a vigilant, transcendental ethics, Blanchot's response to his friend is the inverse, to drive *toward* and even abide in the *il y a* as the location of pure insight.

Central to Blanchot's thought is the distinction he draws between *crude* or *immediate* (i.e. everyday) language and *essential* language, the latter a term he borrows from the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Blanchot's premise is that although all language is the sound of the substitution (and destruction) of the signified for a remainder (i.e. a concept), crude, everyday speech is limited to being a functional vehicle for these concepts, while essential language, the language of literature, has the capacity to contain multitudinous meanings for each word. Blanchot's literary speech tries to avoid the pitfalls of language by introducing distance and variability between signifier and signified, the event from the "like" and "like"

³⁰ The threat of which, as a coming apart of form into non-form or a falling away of the order represented by Creation, is the source of its omnipresent urgency.

and “like” or the music from the instrument. Blanchot refines this point in *The Space of Literature*:

In crude or immediate speech, language as language is silent. But beings speak in it. And, as a consequence of the use which is its purpose—because, that is, it serves primarily to put us in connection with objects, because it is a tool in a world of tools where what speaks is utility and value—beings speak in it as values. They take on the stable appearance of objects existing one by one and assume the certainty of the immutable. The crude word is neither crude nor immediate. But it gives the illusion of being so. It is extremely reflective; it is laden with history...the immediacy which common language communicates to us is only veiled distance, the absolutely foreign passing for the habitual, the unfamiliar which we take for the customary, thanks to the veil which is language and because we have grown accustomed to words’ illusion.

(40)³¹

The illusion of words Blanchot cites here is of course the same sleight of hand that accompanies the totalization of the real,

³¹ It must be noted that Blanchot’s use of the terms *crude* and *immediate* are not analogous to the “little language”/ “words of one syllable” that Bernard covets in *The Waves*. Confusingly, in fact, the everyday speech Blanchot invokes here is in many ways the *opposite*—more comparable to the language of ornate phrases debased by metaphor and signification. The speech, in other words, that points directly at what it means.

the thing with the "semblance of the thing." The utility of language in its everyday use—nomenclatural, ontological and descriptive—bestows upon it a false but convincing transparency, the ability to, in a manner of speaking, conceal the evidence of its own crime: the substitution of object for concept, other for selfsame, *totality for infinity*. Blanchot's difficult and rather saw-toothed separation of common and essential/literary language rests on this basic deception, entrammelling the former and contested by the latter, but a persistent hazard for both. "Language has within itself the moment that hides it..." Blanchot claims, an insidious power "by which mediation (that which destroys immediacy) seems to have the spontaneity, the freshness, and the innocence of the origin."

Beyond its tendency to make the act of signification at once acute and yet invisible, the efficacy of this mediating language is limited by its own representational power. As reductive to a single signified, it can neither be ethical in Levinas' terms nor enflesh/represent the ineffable or unrepresentable. The premise here is that the abyssal territory of the *il y a*, of radical alterity/ absolute otherness, can only be grazed by language, brushed as if by a glancing blow, in the very moment of its disappearance. Blanchot's essential language sets for itself this specific purpose. In his reading of Blanchot, Fagenblat emphasizes the loss of (ontological/ epistemological)

control that both instigates and sustains an aesthetics of essential language. Where crude language "appropriates and thus annihilates existing things for the sake of its general economy of meaning" Fagenblat writes, "literature begins only when the ordinary, representational power of language fails and another language is presented in its place, the other language of the *il y a*" (301).

Like Levinas, Blanchot uses night and darkness to evoke the site of the other language. And like the loss of visual fidelity which marks the transition from the ordered world of objects into the instinct chaos of the *il y a*, this 'nocturnal' speech germinates from a feeling of volatility, an eroding of faith in language to keep the world from breaking up and dissipating. Essential language is what remains after all other speech has been boiled away (recall *Reassemblage*), because the world it engages exists beyond the reach of light. This language behaves for Blanchot as image rather than word, in that it borrows from images their disassociation with the object world behind them. Like Lily Briscoe's lighthouse, the signified in Blanchot's essential language regains a measure of its freedom from the dictatorial authority of rote signification.

Blanchot's idea is not unlike Stravinsky's: emancipation by broadening and diffusing, so that the meaning of words and the concepts they represent become unstable, creatures of night.

But, where Levinas' night is looming and cavernous, Blanchot imagines night as divided in a similar way to his duelling languages: a night of sleep and a night of dreams³². He refers to dreaming as "the other night", the phantasmal (metaphysical) counterpart to (material) sleep whose appearance marks the moment when the secrets and disappearances of the night, its absences, become the very fabric of its opposite number, of the "other night". Blanchot explains, "when everything has disappeared in the night, 'everything has disappeared' [itself] appears. This is the *other* night. Night is this apparition... [and] apparitions, phantoms, and dreams are an allusion to this empty night" (163).³³ This nocturnal world clearly borders the *il y a*, in that "the other night" is not simply the absence of the material but the domain of *absence itself* disclosing itself, where the "invisible is what one cannot cease to see...the incessant making itself seen." In the other night, Blanchot seems to suggest, the unspeakable (the "rustling") and the unseeable (the dark) both suddenly become perceptible and imminent.

³² In the introduction to his book on sleep and dreaming in literature, Herschel Farbman explains this duality simply: "Every night is two nights. The division of the night in two is Blanchot's way of expressing his sense of the irreducibility of the dream to the sleep on which it depends" (1). In this sense the dichotomous nature of Blanchot's night recalls the Levinas' oppositional tendencies of totality and infinity (i.e. the latter's irreducibility to the former).

³³ Fagenblat similarly describes as "a space of darkness and contestation, of language existing in the twilight of meaning where it loses its mastery over the objects it identifies...[where] alone do words outlast their instrumental meaning" (301).

Herschel Farbman explains that this journey to the other night is most evident in literature's proximity to dying ["the place from which writing emerges is as much a place of death as it is a production site" (10)]. The domain of writing, for Blanchot, begins at the threshold of the waking world, the "I", the ontologically aware waking self that must "die" to allow for the act of dreaming³⁴. Farbman writes that writing is what wakes when the "I" sleeps³⁵. It is in this underworld, the proverbial graveyard of the self (and thus, as I will argue, of the known other) that Blanchot claims writing, the essential language, is ascendant.

The essential language's critical praxis is to depose its own authority and therefore its control over 'the night', but this displacement rests on an instinctive resistance to authoritarian (or documentarian) 'looking'. Like Trinh shows us, this language and the gaze that informs it trades in gradations and shades rather than exactitude; it is a 'sidelong' gaze which allows it *perceive* the ethereal, the other night, ever on the verge of disincarnation. Blanchot too alludes to this 'disappearing' gaze, a seeing without looking at directly, with the evocative example of Orpheus and Eurydice at the threshold of the

³⁴ From Ann Smock's introduction to *The Space of Literature*, "Literature's space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere, Blanchot says, which is *here*. No one enters it, though no one who is at all aware of it can leave: it is all departure, moving off, *éloignement*...it is its very own displacement or removal" (9).

Underworld: "When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens...For him Eurydice is the furthest that art can reach...she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend. She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the other night" (171). The moment of the Orphic turn is the flickering of artistic interruption, one that is by its very nature too transient to be seen directly. Michael Newman describes this space as the interstitial opening where seeing and not seeing (and the seen and not seen) is as yet an unresolved conflict: "the eye both wants to see and not to see...that which lies behind the visible. This duplicity is manifested in Orpheus' double turn-away from *and* [*italics mine*] towards Eurydice" (157).

It is in this moment alone, I argue, that the other and otherness can appear before the eye without being hidden by the gaze. Like Trinh's narrator in *Reassemblage*, the impulse of this seer is not to look "at" by look "nearby", peripherally, in the lag or delay between perception and vision. Before a language of art, there must therefore be an artistic gaze from which it emerges and a spontaneous, metaphysical intending. The emancipatory potential of art rests on perceiving this instant and on the extent to which the work of art can 'midwife' it into

³⁵ "Every dreamer—everyone, literate or not, poet or not—is involved in a form of writing" (10).

an extemporary aesthetics, losing as little fidelity as possible to the Orphic space, to the other night.³⁶

The aptness of the Orphic turn as a metaphor for art's fugacious insight extends not just to Orpheus the seer but to the magnetic source of his desire to see, Eurydice—the other—paradoxically the focal point of his gaze who nonetheless *must* remain out of focus, hidden but at the very edge of sight. By completing the turn to look upon Eurydice directly, Orpheus transgresses the border over which Blanchot's essential artistic language precariously tightropes, between perception and revelation, the radical alterity of Levinas' other and the other disclosed by ontologization (causing Eurydice's symbolic death and vanishing back into the Underworld). The disappearance or, more accurately, the imminent disappearing of radical alterity is a prerequisite to its own echolocation; it is the very death rattle of these infinities that become audible to the artist's ear. The Orphic space of art exists, I argue, under this eclipse of presence and absence in similitude, the hypnagogic moment,³⁷

³⁶ Blanchot maintains that this achievement, in order to avoid betraying its very purpose, must be an act of surrendering to the spontaneous, as miraculous each time as much the first, rather than toiling toward likeness: "Writing never consists in perfecting the language in use, rendering it purer...This operation is so difficult and dangerous that every writer and every artist is surprised each time he achieves it without disaster" (48, 52).

³⁷ That is, involuntarily epiphanic, like the myoclonic muscle spasm that often occurs in the moment just before sleep in the transition between the conscious and unconscious mind, usually and not surprisingly experienced as a falling sensation.

for which art provides a tenuous (and temporary) asylum.³⁸ The essential (or as I have called it, nocturnal) language, is for Blanchot both the beginning of writing as art and its highest vernacular, when "speaking is still the shadow of speech...an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary...the point at which here coincides with nowhere" (48). A dialect of literature, like an 'ethical' discourse of art, must therefore begin and end in search of the spectral—its subject is the vestige of the other rather than the essence, the "empty night" assailed by the violent intercession of sight and common language, leaving only shadows. The rest of this chapter explores the problematics of discussing otherness in literature, whose description becomes the site of its own disappearance.

Salman Rushdie's 1994 short story "The Courter" explores the relationship between language, particularly names, and identity. "The Courter" is the story of first generation Indian immigrants in London, a family of five, their *ayah*³⁹ Mary or "Certainly-Mary" (so named for her tendency to answer most questions with "certainly" or "certainly not"), and an Eastern European

³⁸ Samuel Beckett's comparison of Dutch painter Geer Van Velde's paintings to literature is somewhat illuminating here, in its phrasing as much as its meaning: "On dirait l'insurrection des molécules, l'intérieur d'une pierre un millièème de seconde avant qu'elle ne se désagrège" (*"It is like an insurrection of molecules, [in] the inside of a stone a millisecond before it disintegrates"*) ("La Peinture" 128).

³⁹ Maid, or more specifically, house servant and nursemaid.

building porter and night-watchman named Mecir who becomes Mary's confidant. Mecir also has a nickname: "Mixed-Up", given him by Rushdie's young unnamed narrator, a stand-in for Mecir's Slavic name which has the narrator derisively declines to learn to pronounce because it has "invisible accents on it in some Iron Curtain language" (179). Mecir is also the titular "courter", an auspicious misnomer bestowed by Certainly-Mary (whom he later 'courts') due to her erratic substitutions of English consonants—in this case, "p" for "c".⁴⁰ After their courtship begins, Certainly-Mary is again renamed by the narrator and his siblings, "it's Jumble-Aya who's fallen for Mixed-Up" (181).

Limited in their grasp of English, Mecir and Mary are both tested by the language barrier and freed by it. Their relationship is largely nonverbal; language is secondary, almost an afterthought. They eventually discover an unusual way to fill in the silences and traverse the distance between their cultures—a third, "private" language, after a fashion: chess. Mecir, a chess master in his former life, instructs Mary in the game's mysteries, tactics and missteps, metaphorically guiding

⁴⁰ The story contains several other examples of renaming and misnaming in addition to these, each a case of translation anxieties: the narrator's baby sister Scheherzade becomes *Scare-zade*, his love interest Chandni becomes *Moonlight* (a loose translation of the name) etc. In one anecdote, the narrator's father embarrassingly misidentifies the appropriate word in British English when trying to buy a nipple for the baby's bottle. In short, matching names with concepts (and people), is a recurring concern.

her—she being a more recent migrant—through the process of diasporic acclimatization. Using chess both as a surrogate lingua franca and the language of romance, Mecir shows Mary the strategies and pitfalls of the immigrant experience, “drawing her, step by step, into the infinite possibilities of the game” (195).

Importantly however, Mary’s education in chess does not represent a replacement or papering over of her Indian-ness or Mecir’s Slavic-ness any more than it brings her closer to Englishness. Chess is instead the site of cultural and linguistic *difference*, which reveals the antagonisms internal to the idea of stable identities in and of themselves. Chess the private language becomes the vernacular of their hybridized alteregos—Mixed-up and Jumble-Aya—and so represents not only a third language but also a way beyond the opposition of biculturalism, that is, of either belonging or not belonging.

Rushdie’s “The Courter” in this sense distinctly recalls Homi Bhabha’s influential postcolonial discourse of cultural ‘hybridity’. In *The Location of Culture* (2004), Bhabha provides a commentary on the work of American artist Renée Green, specifically the latter’s *Sites of Genealogy* installation in New York featured a connecting stairwell between two separate spaces, which Bhabha reads as an intervening site of collision

which not only intermediates between two antagonists, but also subverts their own *internal* stability:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference...[which] prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities...[this] interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity. (5)

Bhabha claims that this hybridity (incarnated by the figure of the postcolonial person whose identity exists 'in between' the colonizing and colonized cultures), though often understood as evidence of dominance of colonizing culture's narrative, actually disrupts the colonialist project by confounding its authoritative expectations. The hybridity that is born in the "interstitial passage"⁴¹ cannot be reconstituted (and therefore claimed or controlled) by either extremity, and thus decenters the colonialist's place as the authoritative narrator of its own discourse and turns the (hybrid) outsider/other's gaze back on the colonizer. The opening of what Bhabha calls the "third

⁴¹ An echo again of Forster's passage, as a conduit between cultures. I discuss this interpretation more specifically in chapter four.

space" is thus a result of the dialectical opposition or collision of the two cultures but is not constrained by this binary; Bhabha explains elsewhere, quite straightforwardly, that "[s]omething opens up as an effect of this dialectic...that will not be contained within it, that cannot be returned to the two oppositional principles" ("Translator Translated" 82).

In my reading of Rushdie's story, it is in this third space that Mecir and Mary, Mixed-up and Jumble-Aya, find access to emancipation from the antagonism of the self and the other, a way back to the ethical encounter. Though it belongs to the order of postcolonial theory and not psychoanalysis, Bhabha's hybridity is nonetheless based on Jacques Lacan's formulation of the missing third property or 'lack' which presents itself as desire, such that the components of dialectical interaction (of two cultures, two persons, or self with other) are actually always 1 plus 1 plus the surplus, the *object petit a*, which Lacan describes as "the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier" (*Four Fundamentals* 270). As Slavoj Žižek adroitly clarified, this surplus object erodes the "deadlock of classification" between two positions by representing the eternal remainder, thus "inscrib[ing] into an order of symbolic differences its constitutive antagonism" ("The Sexual is Political"). Though

Zizek's analogy—of the surplus in categories of sexual difference (literally, the + in LGBT+)—is a characteristically contentious one, its Lacanian roots make it a sibling to Bhabha's hybridity. He writes of this remainder, the impossible *objet petit a* which prevents categorization from ever fully inscribing or describing symbolic difference, that "in the final act of subdivision, we no longer get two particular parts or elements, two somethings, but a something (the rest) and a nothing." The remainder, in other words, is not what is left behind after the differentiation or interaction between categorizes, but represents difference itself, and in turn erodes the illusion of internal hegemony within sexual categories (or, in the case of Bhabha, colonizing cultures) themselves.

Rushdie hints at this unresolved (and irresolvable) hybridity between two positions being the axis of his story when his narrator, as an adult, finally realizes of the similarity of his own predicament (as a member of the Indian diaspora in England) to Mary and Mecir's: "I, too, have ropes around my neck...pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose*...I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose" (211). Bhabha has interpreted the comma in the title of Rushdie's story cycle (*East, West*) which

contains "The Courter" as essentially the marker of hybridity. The comma "both divides and joins East and West" (Reynolds 179) Bhabha muses, as Green's stairwell does for separate spaces. Rushdie's story is entirely contained in that comma, which makes possible a world of shades and in-betweens which cannot be subdivided, and "furnishes the little room for literature."

Hybridity thus quite literally represents a way to keep oneself from being subsumed by either culture, to avoid the "noose". The alternate identities of Mixed-up and Jumble-Aya are *not* the resolution of their native and immigrant selves (that is to say, 1 plus 1), they are hybrid (surplus) identities which both reveal and represent a way out of the antagonism of- and within-identities. Bhabha summarizes that, "by exploring this hybridity, this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" ("Cultural Diversity" 157).

Bhabha's notion of hybridity has of course been extensively annotated and criticized, by Amar Acheraïou, Gayatri Spivak and others, particularly as an imbalanced theory that implicitly accepts the centrality of colonialism within postcolonialism.⁴² While those critiques are both compelling and useful, they are not necessary to my purpose here. I argue that this "third

⁴² See in particular Acheraïou's book *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* (2011).

space", represented in Rushdie's story by the "private language", is also a metaphor for the space made accessible by art, including but not limited to literature. Does not art *itself* behave as a private, impossible language of surplus, counting nowise for itself, an "interstitial passage" between the (unstable) self and the radically other?⁴³ Dialectical uncertainties allow for the artwork to interrupt the totalization that imperils otherness. Art, as a language, behaves much like an interstice, of unresolved and irresolvable contradictions and temporal antagonisms (which, as Levinas shows, must always exist in the "meanwhile,...[deprived of] the salvation of becoming"). I claim that this language reveals the internal tensions within the hybrid positions of artist and subject, author and other, and is thus a similarly private language of *surplus* in which radical alterity is always indivisible remainder (the +), the *objet petit a*. As Bhabha has stated elsewhere "the importance of hybridity is *not* [italics mine] to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges...the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" ("The Third Space", 211). The indivisibility of the third space is the

⁴³ When, how much, and in what form are, of course, critical questions, which I pose and attempt to answer in chapter four.

source of its invention: a language to ethically and meaningfully describe alterity.⁴⁴

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent being an especially potent backdrop for literature about hybridity, a postcolonial instance of this intervention can be found in Anita Desai's 1988 novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Though the text resolves itself somewhat cryptically, Desai's Hugo Baumgartner is a fictional representation of the impossibility of the stable self/other dialectic and evokes *within himself* the third space described by Bhabha. Desai's novel follows Hugo's trials as a Jewish exile from Nazi Germany who struggles to recover (or rather, *discover*) a sense of belonging in pre-Partition India. Like Rushdie's Indian emigres in London, Baumgartner in Desai's Calcutta and Bombay is a fixed outlier, certain of nothing so much as his dual otherness: as both Jew and *firanghi*⁴⁵. "Accepting—but not accepted," Hugo reflects on his experience in India, "that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany, he had been dark—his darkness had marked him the

⁴⁴ There is a degree of irony in this, of course, since it is also the severance of the image from the object (and thus the impossibility of 'returning to' the real from its impression) that Levinas uses as his basis for artistic 'disinterest' in "Reality and its Shadow". Here, by participating in the innovation of a 'third' that is separate (essentially above) and apart from the 'two', art's purview instead becomes to reveal the surplus (i.e. the difference as such), finding in the image's very separateness (the interstitial passage) a glimpse of the ineffable *that is hidden in the object itself*.

⁴⁵ From the Hindi फ़िरंगी and Urdu گُفِ رَن (phirangi), possibly Persian in origin, referring specifically to foreigners of generally European or white descent.

Jew, *der Jude*. In India, he was fair -and that marked him the *firanghi*. In both lands, the unacceptable" (20). Hugo's predicament is similar to the diasporic anxiety faced by Rushdie's *Mixed-up and Jumble-Aya*, with one critical difference: where Mecir and Mary represent the messy comingling of two cultures, Hugo arguably embodies the third category or surplus, external to *both* cultures which thus destabilizes both. Desai's novel asks what it means not only to be other, to not belong, but also what otherness is *when not defined by non-belonging*. Hugo is not merely an outsider to particular cultural hegemonies; he represents the impossibility of belonging in itself, the universal anxiety of an imminent otherness *within* the self that prevents it from ever being secure in itself.

Desai's choices and handling of Hugo's Jewishness in the novel is both complex and purposeful. As Isabelle Hesse has noted in her comparative essay on portrayals of twentieth century Jewishness, Hugo's exile from Germany and his subsequent inability to belong in India leaves him only Jewishness from which to draw his identity, a category with which he had not previously much identified. Hugo is already alienated from his Jewishness before the expulsion from Germany that confirms him as other. It is in his exile that he realizes himself the indivisible 'remainder' from which Nazi Germany tries to purify itself. "Strange," he muses while searching for the Jewish

quarter in Venice, "in Germany he had never wanted to search [Jews] out, had been aware of others thinking of him as a Jew but not done so himself. In ejecting him, Germany had taught him to regard himself as one" (62). It is, in other words, as a result of the impossibility of belonging within Nazi Germany's absolutist self-excoriation that Hugo is later compelled to defend his Germanness as "a Jew, not a Nazi" (177).

Hugo's estrangement from the outset of the novel is thus not only from Germanness (and later, Indianness) but also from Jewishness. The choice of portraying the tensions of colonial India as it appears to a protagonist who himself embodies similar contradictions becomes the wellspring of the novel's insights into identity and otherness; alienation itself is the point, its own ethos.⁴⁶ The message of Desai's novel is that being eternally "in between" is a universal condition, i.e. the presence of a surplus otherness within all categories of identification prevents anyone from ever securely belonging.

The ambiguity of Hugo's Jewishness represents different

⁴⁶ Desai acknowledges in interviews the influence of Albert Camus' *The Stranger* on *Baumgartner's Bombay* as well as on her other work, much of which also focuses on exilic characters. Her own assessment of Hugo as a kindred spirit for her own turbulent background and at the same time an embodiment of a basic universal alienation is notable: "I think I'm drawn to such characters...[the] same type of character surfaces again and again [in my work]. I'm interested in people who live in a kind of exile; it may not be political exile, but in some sense it's exile from the rest of society. It may have something to do with my upbringing and my parents. My mother, having been German, lived most of her life in India and never felt able to return to Germany...My father was, in a sense, in exile too. He was from East Bengal, which then became East Pakistan... I was brought up with the same sense of being an outsider. I certainly absorbed it from them" ("You Turn Yourself").

types of foreignness in Germany and in India, reflecting the distinct anxieties of each society and, as Hesse notes, "exposes the contradictions inherent in conceptions of whiteness...[while drawing] attention to the ambivalence of Jewishness as a racial category" (888). Desai has explained in interviews that Hugo's Jewishness was simultaneously a way to universalize his isolation while also hinting at the antagonisms fundamental to constructions of identity: "I had to find a way to generalize his isolation and one way of doing it was to make him a Jew...[yet] I think of it as the human condition" ("Against the Current" 522). This seeming contradiction—a character whose identity is derived from his status as ethnic minority (as Jew) standing in in some way for a universality—is actually a compelling twist on hybridity, as well as an argument for the disruptive possibilities of literature. In essence, Hugo iterates the liminality of hybridity, the falling through the gap, in a way that is deeply similar to the language Mecir and Mary discover as a by-product of their encounter. Though cultural hybridity and hybridity in speech are distinct phenomena, each is born of a dialectic and represents a third not reducible to an alloy of the two. Hugo epitomizes exilic hybridity; he stands in for difference as such, the 'excess' element in the dialectic that is nonetheless a part of both. His location somewhere between the stark delineations of two

cultures undercuts the homogeneity of both, leaving him the dual other, between *der Jude* and *firanghi*, object a residing in an interstitial third space.

Ideas about post-1948 Jewishness also contribute significantly to the ambivalence of Hugo's viewpoint, simultaneously an oppressed minority in Europe and the Orientalist European observer from whose perspective we encounter British India. Hesse explores this dual nature of the archetype of Jewishness and its relationship to and function in Desai's novel: "Post-1948 the ambiguity of the figure of the Jew has been extended to include ideas of both minority and majority, vacillating between definitions of exile and 'otherness' on one hand, and Zionism and settler-colonialism, on the other...Jewishness functions as a means to demonstrate the universal nature of conditions such as exile and belonging" (884; 886). Hugo's hybridity is thus not simply a result of negotiating between birth and adopted cultures, but points at identity as itself emerging out of contradictions. By narrating from within the perspective of both the dominant-colonialist and the minority-colonized, Desai is able to describe otherness as an alienation within as much as from the self.

At this juncture, I would like to pose and begin to develop the questions that arise when discussing the 'potential' of art

to be disruptive, and indeed from any discussion of art in general, namely what, if anything, constitutes this potential? How and when does it enact itself? To what extent can we define what 'disruption' looks like, and what does it mean to be able to 'emancipate' alterity? Is it an act of discovery (of what is already *there* in a particular kind of artwork) or an act of interpretation (of what one perceives to be there)? To this point, I have argued for and traced out the territory which art creates for itself, i.e. the response it motivates in the listener, reader or viewer, a place in which the evocative supersedes the indicative and in which the ineffable remainder of otherness becomes barely and momentarily perceptible. I address these questions in a more thorough and methodical way in chapter four. To address how we come about the experience of art (and therefore take away from it some unique insight), however, I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of the 'oblique' looking proffered by Trinh which inverts the discussion regarding academic/ ontological vs artistic/nocturnal speech.

The *dialectical* relationship between art and the perceiver of art who 'reads' the artwork represents, as a reading of the work of Franz Brentano, Max Van Manen and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (each building on Husserl's "image consciousness") shows, the two sides to an equation that is the key to understanding how meaning can be read from a text as either indicative or

"vocative".⁴⁷ The fragile insights 'embedded' in a text (such as its representation of otherness) rely not only on the gaze of the artist, but on the way the reader chooses to approach the text, i.e. how to 'look'.

The German philosopher Franz Brentano usefully describes the act of observing one's own engagement with objects (and reality) as a reflective grasping that occurs alongside (effectively simultaneous with) the engagement itself, an "inner observation" which he calls grasping reality "*en parergo*, 'by the way'" (Moran 8). Dermot Moran, in his reading of Brentano explains that this secondary act of perceiving is "built into the original act", i.e. that the experiencing of an object is inseparable from the insights one understands the object to contain within itself, though it cannot be said where precisely in the interaction that meaning *actually* lies. In this way, it may be said that the production of meaning, the process by which objects (or language) come to mean (or not mean) something is 'contained' in neither the object nor the subject—it is instead created in the very act of dialectical experience upon which one reflects and which, therefore, one can only apprehend *en parergo*, "by the way." For language, including the 'nocturnal',

⁴⁷ This term, used extensively by Max Van Manen in *Phenomenology of Practice*, is related to the descriptor 'nocturnal language' I have used, with the key distinction that it introduces the question of *where* meaning is located i.e. in the object or the subject, or if we are fundamentally mistaken to attribute it to *either* instead of to the 'experience' itself.

vocative language of art I have privileged, this suggests that while the potential of art (to evoke otherness or aspects thereof without totalization) may to an extent be indicated or 'motivated' by the work itself, its true meaning or effect is neither determined by the artist nor the audience, neither the utterer nor the listener, but created within the dialectical, ephemeral moment of experience. This immediately undercuts, to an extent, the contentious discussion about which works of art are superior to others and which possess something others do not; the vocative potential of art is always experientially realized. This renders any discussion or arbitration of the objective merits of particular artworks somewhat secondary (I develop this point and the similar regarding of symbols in later chapters).

Max Van Manen goes further along this path when he writes in *Phenomenology of Practice* (2014) that phenomenological insight—i.e. moments of acute perception, realization and disclosure—occur in a state of near inadvertence, in a sort of openness to experience that is neither directed nor aimless, a looking without focusing, (following Hegel) an "active passivity" (345-347). Van Manen observes that perception, like language, is at its most immediate incidental rather than causal; an object or event cannot be safely identified as producing a particular insight or response in a subject *every time*, as a work of art

cannot reliably be said to always 'cause' a particular feeling in a particular audience. Emotions, like insights, are epiphenomenal, they occur while 'looking away', as one falls into sleep when not actively trying to. Van Manen calls this state of passive readiness "preduction", which must precede the moment of "abduction" in which the insights that lead to the ascertaining of meaning occurs (344-345). It is the moment and state of preduction, in which one is not actively interpreting or reflecting, when one is most open to revelation.⁴⁸

Approaching art (and in the same way, Trinh shows us, the other) *en parergo*—as epiphenomena rather than stable or indicative—and looking at it not directly but obliquely encourages us to think about the experiencing of art as a spontaneous bearing witness, in which it reveals itself to us (especially with visual and aural media) sensorially and unexpectedly. To remain open to art, to be actively passive, is thus akin to the pre-reflective openness ("metaphysics precedes ontology") required for Levinas' ethical non-dogmatic relationship with the other, in the very state, as Merleau-Ponty

⁴⁸ It would not be incorrect to interpret that, following Van Manen's reasoning, nearly any phenomena can be experienced in a way that resembles the feeling that we associate with experiencing art. That is, while we may say that the properties of a particular text, image or piece of music can tend to evoke or motivate a certain feeling in an individual (which *may* be somewhat similar to the feeling experienced by someone else when encountering the same work), understanding the epiphanies of art as inadvertent, as a 'looking away' that lets in phenomenological insights, and therefore the production of meaning as a dialectical exchange or a bearing witness (among many other insinuations), does greatly widen out the very definition of 'art'. This

argues, the being that perceives art is enfleshed, i.e. not separate from the body. In his essay "Eye and Mind" (1960) Merleau-Ponty echoes Levinas' description of an underlying world 'beneath' the world of form, a world which is imperceptible through scientific analysis of form but which art glimpses in the instant of its birthing:

Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above...must return to the "there is" which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and acts...But art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning...Art and only art does so in full innocence. (160-161)

Though Merleau-Ponty specifically treats painting here, he makes a related point about literary speech in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) which speaks to the reinvention of the meaning of words that occurs depending on where and how they are deployed. Speech is ever gestural, and its meaning is initially determined on its face, i.e. perceptually instead of in

approach substantially informs my analysis of how the radical alterity of the other endures the moment of "abduction", as is discussed further in later chapters in conjunction with other texts.

comparison to a sustained meaning, since the meaning of speech is *materially* inseparable from its utterance and perception. Merleau-Ponty's sense of literature is thus one of consistent, even constant invention in the meaning of words:

In the case of prose or poetry...we have the illusion of already possessing within ourselves, in the shape of the common property meaning of words, what is required for the understanding of any text whatsoever...But in fact, it is less the case that the sense of a literary work is provided by the common property meaning of words, than that it contributes to changing that accepted meaning. There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism. (208-209)

Literature, though it may exist somewhat further away on the spectrum from the phenomenal and from sensory experience⁴⁹, is nonetheless not simply an effective or ineffective deployment of language whose meaning is preset, but (echoing Blanchot's separation of "crude" and "literary" speech) it perpetually reinvents the meaning of language, since its project in its most basic form is to invent relationships between words and thereby

⁴⁹ As from the "howl" that began this chapter.

test the coordinates of their meaning, change their shape, even shed them entirely. From all of this we may extrapolate that art's quarry more broadly is towards this "brute meaning" that lies underneath the narrow corridors of ontological and analytical categories. The gesture of art is to catch the world unawares, to ambush it in a sense as it is being formed and taking on form. And since this achievement relies on a dialectical exchange between the work of art and the body which perceives it, it is this very gesture that allows art to similarly ensnare the fragile alterity of the other.

In the final chapter of his 2016 novel *Zero K*, Don DeLillo movingly describes a phenomenon familiar to many New Yorkers, a happenstance called Manhattanhenge. Sometimes called the Manhattan solstice, Manhattanhenge is an occurrence during which, twice a year, either the rising or setting sun align perfectly with the buildings and gridlines of downtown Manhattan and in a manner vaguely reminiscent of Stonehenge. In a May 2016 interview about the novel with *The Guardian*, DeLillo relates the precise moment when the sun, the skyscrapers and the street lines synchronize as a sudden, ephemeral revelation, "a wonderful moment. This enormous glow, like nothing you've seen, a concentration of light in that narrow street...And you know, like most things, there and gone in a flash" (Brooks). These

moments, because they appear and disappear without warning, catch us unguarded, when we are most open to epiphany. They behave as a sudden flashing, of realization or unforeseen Revelation, like Gabriel appearing before Muhammad in the darkness of the cave of Hira. The (impossible) aspiration of art is to arrest this awe before it vanishes—the fragility of the moment before light changes.

As he watches the spellbinding sun falling on Manhattan, DeLillo's narrator in *Zero K* observes a young boy in a state of rapture, awestruck by the event. Though he wonders if it is as a result of the boy being somehow "macrocephalic, [or] mentally deficient", the narrator is transfixed by the boy's wordless, ecstatic cry, a sound expressing the "purest [form of] astonishment" (274). As if paying his respects to Bernard's crisis of faith as a writer in *The Waves*, DeLillo concludes his novel with his narrator reaching the very same realization about the artifices of language when compared to this cry: "[the boy's] howls of awe were far more suitable than words...I didn't need heaven's light. I had the boy's cries of wonder."

The howl, this cry, as I have argued, is the purest of noises, the companion to phenomenological insight and the gift of unexpected revelation. It is also in this *same state* that we can rediscover otherness as a metaphysical (and thus ethical) relation. In the next chapter, I explore the figure of the other

from a comparative standpoint, in terms of the epistemic boundary or frontier between the self and the other as well as its representation in the contemporary novel form, including how violent collisions with otherness challenge what we know about ourselves.

"He who strikes his *khudi* [*ego self*] with *La ilah*
Produces a seeing eye from dead earth" (185)

- Muhammad Iqbal, *Armaghan-i-Hijaz*

Each in His Prison

Kamel Daoud's 2013 debut novel *The Meursault Investigation* is a contemporary reinvention of Albert Camus' seminal *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) (1942). Daoud's book though is a mirror image, inverted, written from the point of view of the brother of *The Stranger*'s nameless murdered Algerian "Arab". *Meursault* attempts to recover and mourn the victim—who functions mostly as sort of a prop in the existential, late colonial drama of Camus' novel—by belatedly giving him not only a name but an identity, a past. This simple act of naming begins to humanize the Arab, lifting him out of his provincial otherness, his obscurity. It also, of course, re-centers the act and power of authorship, in the quite literal sense of conferring narrative (and canonical) 'authority' upon the postcolonial subject—a counter-discourse or

"writing back" to the colonialist canon⁵⁰.

Yet although Daoud sets out to write 'back' to Camus, ostensibly to refute *The Stranger*, his narrator Harun Uld el-Assas finds himself instead repeatedly walking along the same the same path as his counterpart Meursault, if in the opposite direction. Harun explains his intent explicitly to the unnamed graduate student who is his interviewer: to rescue the voice of his murdered brother Musa and to reverse the current of Camus' story, perhaps arriving eventually at convergence: "It's simple: The story we're talking about should be rewritten, in the same language, but from right to left. That is, starting when the Arab's body was still alive, going down the narrow streets that led to his demise, giving him a name, right up until the bullet him" (7). 'Direction' takes on two meanings here: the figurative, i.e. the perspective from which the story is narrated and the literal, the right to left direction of Arabic

⁵⁰ In the introduction to his book on this subject, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, John Thieme points out that the effect of postcolonial reimaginings of the canon ('con-texts') is not to entrench or re-entrench an oppositional binary (i.e. to 'correct the record'), but rather, recalling Lacan and Bhabha, to reveal hidden instabilities within the canon and therefore also in comparative readings of it. Writes Thieme, "[it became] increasingly apparent that the canon to which [postcolonial authors] were writing back was far from unitary and that the texts to which they were responding were unstable objects that were, in effect, being constructed anew by each postcolonial writer's gaze in a kind of parodic reversal of the process by which postcolonial subjects had been constructed as 'other' during the heyday of imperialism...Whether or not they set out to be combative, the postcolonial con-texts invariably seemed to induce a reconsideration of the supposedly hegemonic status of their canonical departure points, opening up fissures in their supposedly solid foundations that undermined the simplism involved in seeing the relationship between 'source' and con-text in terms of an oppositional model of influence" (2). The conversation between canon and "con-text", Thieme suggests, delves into an interstice whose coordinates are defined by a crosspollination of contradictions, what he describes as a "discursive dialectic operating along a continuum."

script, a vectorial 'opposition' to Latin/ English or, as Daoud writes, "a story that begins at the end and goes back to the beginning. Yes, like a school of salmon swimming upstream" (2)⁵¹. Both senses of the term share a counterpoise relationship to Camus' original; Daoud's project is not merely to rebut but to enflesh a subjectivity missing in *The Stranger*, one that fills in its predecessor's silences and shapes the interaction between the texts in a dialectical rather than autocratic form. The two texts take up positions in a pitched battle, a *collision* of subjectivities.

The novel begins with a rebuke of Camus' nonchalant "Maman died today" (3): "Mama's still alive today" Harun declares (1). Daoud's novel follows this path throughout its entirety, opposing Camus while also echoing him. Harun seems, in spite of himself, to discover more and more aspects of Meursault within himself, each one turned around on its axis. Where Meursault's mother is a distant apparition who, as critics like Jean Gassin and Patrick McCarthy have observed, is evoked by natural symbols (as I discuss shortly), Harun's relationship with his mother is its opposite. He is oppressed by his mother's overbearance, her "sensual closeness" (16), and the survivor's guilt that fractures their relationship after his brother's death ("She

⁵¹ This phrase too can be taken in two different ways, i.e. not just the story of Meursault and the Arab told backwards but also the story of French colonization told from an Algerian perspective.

seemed to resent me for a death I basically refused to undergo, and so she punished me") (36).

Daoud's novel is not actually written from right to left, as it would be in Arabic. It was originally published in his native Algeria in French, under the more illuminating title *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Meursault, counter-investigation). Though opposed and opposing, the two novels thus also share a repository of meaning, nuance and signification embedded in their common vernacular, and so their oppositional postures nonetheless bear a colonial imprint. Daoud acknowledges the imperialism of language from the outset, noting the dull echo of Camus' voice in his own prose (3), but he does so by imagining the project of the postcolonial novel in European languages more broadly as a repurposing of language, in much the same way as postcolonial societies must assimilate the ruined artifacts of colonialist art and architecture within their own continuing history. Harun self-consciously presents his story as a symbolic syncretisation that parallels that of his native Algeria after French colonization: "I'm going to do what was done in this country after Independence: I'm going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language." As he explains to the interviewer, language is the last piece of evidence on the crime scene of his brother's murder, and so also the means by

which he can draw himself toward Meursault.

As in Bhabha's hybridity, by appropriating the colonizer's language, Harun leaves Meursault nowhere to hide, drawing him ever closer to a metatextual confrontation: "You look surprised by my language" Harun later tells the interviewer, "I devoured thousands of books! It seemed to me I was approaching the places where the murderer had lived, I was holding him by the jacket while he was embarking for nothingness, I was forcing him to turn around, look at me, recognize me, speak to me, respond to me, take me seriously" (89-90). Even the structure of Daoud's novel—a confession to a stranger in a bar in Oran (as reviewers like *The Guardian's* Nick Fraser have noted) is a refrain of a later Camus work, *La Chute* (The Fall) (1956), in which Camus' narrator relates his story to an unnamed second-person audience in a series of monologues in a bar in Amsterdam.

Though they are narratively and ritually counterpoised, Daoud seems to seek with Camus' a synergy, an eclipse, where the common meaning of things becomes plain—or alternatively, where Camus, like Meursault, can be called to account for his colonialist indifference. This imbricative synthesis between the two texts penetrates to the imagistic and symbolic levels, and open the novels to a provocatively Hegelian reading, i.e. a higher resolution of two opposing truths. And, as I will argue, it constitutes another version of Levinas' encounter, colonial

and postcolonial subjectivities that undertake 'doing justice' on a more spontaneous level.

In addition to Harun's assertive use of colonialist language, *Meursault* deliberately revisits and repurposes several of *The Stranger's* events, themes, symbols and metaphors. Like Meursault, Harun is deeply alienated from God, but experiences his alienation as abandonment. Both characters respond to God as the father from whom each has been estranged. "Friday?" Harun scornfully remarks, "It's not a day when God rested, it's a day when he decided to run away and never come back" (69), echoing the magistrate who tells a skeptical Meursault "all men believe in God, even those who turn their backs on Him" (69). For Harun, the indifference is at least mutual, again reminding us that there are two halves to a whole, even when one is in absentia. "When the sun's not there to blind you," Harun explains to the interviewer, "what you're looking at is God's back" (39).

Daoud's appropriation of the Algerian sun as a symbol of Meursault's existential panic, in the first, functions as an explicit refutation of Oriental myths of the mysterious, secret-laden darkness of the former colonies. Harun, like his brother, is not the other that is the bearer of secrets or greater truths who Meursault must kill to silence—he suffers under the *same* oppressive sun as his counterpart. Daoud describes the movement of the sun on Friday, the primary day of communal prayer, as

indicative of the same divine indifference, the effect of which is to reclaim the subjectivity of the colonized, to undermine the Orientalist belief that spiritual crisis is the sole purview (and marker) of the enlightened colonizer: "It's the Friday prayer hour I detest the most...there's the sun, which runs its course uselessly on that eternal day, and the almost physical sensation of the idleness of the whole cosmos...As for death, I got close to it years ago, and it never brought me closer to God...there's nothing on the other side but an empty beach in the sun" (68-70). As with *Meursault's* overall counterposition with *The Stranger*) and its mimetic structure (with *La Chute*), the borrowing of Camus' symbolic currency allows Daoud's text to enter the discursive space opened by Camus while challenging, again, the latter's canonical privilege.

The provincial sun plays various potential roles in Camus' text; it alternatively excites Meursault to his existential crisis (McCarthy 49-52), stands in for his absent father or chastises him for his indifference to his mother's death (Gassin 226). It has also been interpreted as Camus indirectly addressing the race question, perhaps depoliticizing it. The sun and sea periodically incite Meursault to fits of Pied-Noir (French Algerian) anxiety without directly referring to it, since, as McCarthy argues, to invoke it directly would itself be a transgression. "The conflict between colonizer and colonized

cannot be treated directly," McCarthy observes, "if the legitimacy of the colonizer is not to be undermined" (49).

Camus' numerous references to the sun are persistently ambiguous; it watches over nearly all of Meursault's movements, but it does so as both witness and chastiser, representing the absent parent. The first reference to the sun in *The Stranger*, as Meursault stands by his mother's coffin, is affirmational: "The room was filled with beautiful late-afternoon sunlight" (7). But as he rises the next day, the sun quickly ascends to its appointed position as superego overseer: "When I went outside, the sun was up... [it] was now a little higher in the sky: it was starting to warm my feet" (12). Soon after, Meursault describes a growing feeling of discomfort and exposure: "The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute...I was surprised at how fast the sun was climbing in the sky" (15-16).

Meursault's relationship with Marie, his romantic partner, is repeatedly reproached by the sun acting as a powerful representation of maternal superego (with Marie as id): "the day, already bright with the sun, hit me like a slap in the face. Marie was jumping with joy and kept on saying what a beautiful day it was" (47). Marie is positioned as a potential replacement for Meursault's mother (McCarthy 50), and his coolness to Marie's suggestion of marriage followed by his

nihilistic murder of the Arab suggest a dual alienation from both women. The sun is thus also a sign of Meursault's emotional estrangement; as McCarty has noted "[i]f the sun be accepted as an image of the mother, then Meursault is fleeing both the indifferent mother and the tender Marie. He is still unable to free himself from the former by caring for the latter" (53).

Like these other important scenes, the moment Meursault shoots the anonymous Arab (Harun's brother Musa in Daoud's novel) on the beach is accompanied by overwhelming flashes of sunlight and heat, exciting in him a sort of violence that seems less like bloodlust and more a kind of lapse or vertigo ("[t]hat's when everything began to reel") (59), a losing of his grip on himself. Just before the murder, Meursault feels a sort of overfilling or *exceeding* of himself, again accompanied by maternal alienation. Stuart Gilbert's original 1946 translation (the British edition originally titled *The Outsider*) is more instructive on this point:

The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations – especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting

through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer...(75)⁵²

In the Algerian afternoon, Meursault's subjectivity seems to be not melting exactly but rather becoming untethered, spilling out of his own person. Washed out by the sun, his ironic posture—represented especially during his trial as a detached self-restraint—disappears into an act of emotionally enflamed violence against the colonial subject. Instead of a personal death caused by imperialist indifference, Camus writes the murder as a moment of fiery Judgement or Phlegethontic⁵³ condemnation (In Ward's translation, "The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire") (59).

And yet, as the sun makes Meursault a stranger to himself, it transforms "the stranger" from "Arab" (i.e. the faceless colonial subject, who is transparent under the imperial gaze) to the other who is unknown and unknowable, the wrathful bearer of terrible truths. Meursault describes a shaft of sunlight that reflects off the Arab's knife that seems to join him to Meursault even as it threatens him, a physical sign of their metaphysical encounter, in Gilbert's version, a "long, thin blade [which] transfixed [his] forehead" (75). The result of

⁵² Later editions like Ward's have replaced "bursting through" (Fr. *battaient*, 'to beat against') with "throbbing under". The former, I feel, is far more revealing in context.

⁵³ The fiery river in the Greek Underworld, that is.

this assault is that Meursault is temporarily blinded, awestruck, and so commits the murder in a condition of rapture. But, I argue, this is a blindness that has in fact the opposite symbolic purpose; blotting out the physical features—and politics—of the colonizer and colonized, it reveals instead the chthonic level of the other in *himself*. The scene becomes not about the Frenchman and the Arab but the self and the other laid bare, strangers met on a beach. The symbolic function of the sun in *The Stranger* is to both draw out and make imminent the other's alterity (in Lacanian terms, the *remainder*) and thereby reveal the strangeness of the self alienated from itself. Concurrent with its other imagistic functions, the sun exposes the frailty inherent within identity; rather than heighten Meursault's fear of the other's impending Arabness, he is literally blinded to it. In the final accounting, the precise nature of the Arab's foreignness, his identity, seem to fall away for Meursault in the same way as does his own grip on himself, and—like *Victor Frankenstein and his monster*—his violence is instead directed at the other's *metaphysical* proximity. While the sun blinds Meursault to his action, everything else is left harshly exposed—in its essential nakedness, in face to face relation.

Conversely, in the moments immediately preceding the murder, Camus twice describes the Arab's face as shrouded in the shadow

of a rock, ostensibly the only shade available on the sunlit beach, though (returning now to the Ward translation) "the rest of his body [was] in the sun" (58). So obscured, Meursault strains to read or understand the Arab's features and intentions, and the inability to read the other's face immediately engenders a crisis within Meursault of his own subjectivity: "Maybe it was the shadows on his face, but it looked like he was laughing. I waited. The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows." Again, just like Victor and the creature, the inscrutability of the other's face dooms the encounter to catastrophe.

Meursault's relation and his eventual violence is thus not in the strictest sense with and against the "Arab", whose face he cannot see, but with otherness itself; his failure in this moment is of his inability to recognize the other as an ethical subject, in the instant the face of the other meets him with its first imperative, "do not kill me". In his feverish delirium, Meursault's most primal anxiety is his inability to practice Levinas' ethics and responsibility for the other as first philosophy. As he continues to fire, the face of the stranger becomes the "inert body", and the encounter with the other becomes an inexorable failure.

Daoud too seems to affirm the symbolic centrality and

omnipresence of the sun. The sun recurs more discretely in Daoud's novel, as a vision both of the colonizer's moment of moral trepidation and his ultimate self-absolution. Harun is at first contemptuous of Meursault's identity crisis on the beach, and of Camus' implied sympathy for Meursault over his anonymous victim:

So the Frenchman plays the dead man and goes on and on about how he lost his mother, and then about how he lost his body in the sun, and then about how he lost a girlfriend's body, and then about how he went to church and discovered that his God had deserted the human body...Good God, how can you kill someone and then take even his own death away from him? (3)

But Harun seems elsewhere wary of the sun himself, cognisant somehow of it as a threat, its potency to totally immolate subjectivity. Notwithstanding his derision of Meursault's purported defense, Harun muses about something similarly mysterious, something clearly Icarian that happens under the sun. "Musa didn't do anything that day but get too close to the sun, in a way" (62) he reflects, seemingly speaking more to himself than to his interviewer. He appears not to know exactly what he means by this; the observation seems to catch him unawares. But the revelation that follows, his "family secret" (80)—that he, too, had murdered a man during the Algerian war of

Independence (in his case, a Frenchman)⁵⁴—blurs the lines between Harun and Meursault, the former following in the latter's wake.⁵⁵ Days before the murder, Harun sees the Frenchman, Joseph (whom he takes care to name) for the first time, and their eventual violent collision is heavily foreshadowed. This first encounter, on a crowded street in the afternoon, is immediately assailed by the sun, reprising its role from *The Stranger* as the panoptic overseer under which the relation with otherness plays out. "That afternoon there was a big, heavy, blinding sun in the sky," Harun recalls, "and the unbearable heat scrambled my mind" (82). Harun is in the same state of blindness—about the other's political and racial identity—as Meursault, and in this state otherness, stripped of individual features and distinctness, is at its most alien and threatening.

Yet it precisely *in* this ignorance there that there arises a possibility for ethical relations. Blindness under the sun

⁵⁴ Like he does with Camus' sun symbolism, Harun here both reprises Meursault's action and repurposes it, staking claim to the choices and consequences of violence as an expression of postcolonial subjectivity. Harun's murder of the Frenchman inverts the direction violence, from colonial subject to colonist, so that violence is no longer the exclusive right of the colonizer but can be appropriated and directed back by the other. Taking Meursault's sole right to violence from him is thus another instance where Harun "take[s] the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind...[to] build [his] own house" (2).

⁵⁵ To Harun's great frustration, and as a sort of burlesque of Meursault's trial, he is afterwards accosted by authorities not for murdering the Frenchman in and of itself, but rather that he did not do it in service of the Algerian Revolution (109) and that his real crime was not being adequately patriotic. Rather than being validated as a murderer, he is robbed of his revenge against Meursault and—synergistically—left as alienated from his crime as Meursault is from his. "The Frenchman," he ruefully observes, "had been erased with the same meticulousness applied to the Arab on the beach twenty years earlier" (97). In the postcolonial role of 'writing back', Harun finds himself re-enacting something beyond his control, living, as it were, the same story but "from right to left."

depoliticizes the encounter with the Frenchman, but the other who one meets in this 'blindness' is a metaphysical subject, unknown and unknowable, irradiated by the sun yet hidden in shadow⁵⁶—in Levinas terms, the other "metaphysically desired". The ethical stakes of Harun's encounter with the Frenchman are thus raised even higher; the other he confronts is not the Frenchman Joseph or (intertextually) Meursault, but the other as the bearer of radical alterity. For his part Harun, unlike Meursault, seems to recognize (if only in retrospect) these consequences. "The Other is a unit of measurement you lose when you kill" (90) he tells the interviewer, "I'd chilled all human bodies by killing only one...the only verse in the Koran that resonates with me is this: 'if you kill a single person, it is as if you have killed the whole of mankind'" (91).⁵⁷

The killing itself, however, happens not in the sun but at night, in a revealing tableau of light and shadow. Joseph emerges as if indeed out of a primordial darkness, slowly taking on a human shape as Harun peers into the night: "The black shadow suddenly had eyes...the beginnings of a face" (83), evoking the precarious fluctuation between form and non-form in the *il y*

⁵⁶ In this sense Meursault and Harun are awestruck by the sun to the same effect as Marlow and Mrs. Moore are by darkness.

⁵⁷ See Quran 5:32 Surah al-Ma'idah: "For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind" (92).

a. The Frenchman seems to hover in this "in between", taking and then losing shape and the encounter, the ethical moment, teeters on the verge of failure as he does so. Significantly, Harun waits until the moment when the face is no longer recognizable as a face before firing, so that—just like Meursault on the beach, looking upon the Arab whose face is in shadow—he is momentarily able to absolve himself of his responsibility for the other: "the Frenchman moved...and retreated into the shadows...the darkness devoured what remained of his humanity" (85).⁵⁸ Harun reels at the gravity of the moment; objects seem to verge on disappearance ("every angle and curve stood out so confusedly"), and the encounter becomes ossified entirely outside of the flow of time, "as if our lives since Musa's death had been nothing but playacting" (84).

This murder, like the other it resurrects, occurs in an overlay of the two novels, joining the two across time and space. Harun even echoes Meursault when recalling the moment of Musa's death twenty years earlier: "I can't clearly make out Musa's face" (73). The implication I am suggesting here is that the two murders are not opposing actions, one avenging the other, but the *same* action seen from opposing sides. Both encounters, Camus' and Daoud's, are located in an imbricative

⁵⁸ As Levinas tells us, it is the face which first "orders and ordains" (*Ethics and Infinity* 97) us, so that its concealment in both instances here is a predilection of imminent ethical catastrophe.

third space opened by the 'collision' of the two texts. Harun specifically references the meeting of the two 'stories', left and right, as he describes finding the doomed Frenchman at first trapped between two levels or *stories* of his house, the word here taking on a profound double meaning: "The man was there, wedged between two stories and some walls, and his only way out was my story, which left him no chance" (83-84). The way "out" represents, in my reading, a passage to and from both novels, a liminal passage much like Renée Green's stairwell. The author explains, in an interview with *The New Yorker* in 2015: "I'm not responding to Camus—I'm finding my own path *through* Camus" [italics mine] (Treisman).

Meursault is thus neither a homage to nor rebuke of *The Stranger*, but an *eclipse*, an overwriting of a story on top of another which has the effect of subverting the original's authority. Daoud's work fills in the gaps, twisting through and around Camus, and the resulting shape of the new "hybrid" text is dynamic, a mutation only partially resembling its progenitors. *Meursault* begins and ends with echoes of its predecessor, as if the fabric of Daoud's story is drawn taut over Camus' and so must traverse the same distance and along the same contours. As well as metamorphosing "Maman died today" at the outset, Daoud coopts Camus' final statement of Meursault's defiance on the eve of his execution: "that there be a large

crowd of spectators the day of [his] execution and that they greet [him] with cries of hate" (123). Harun finds at last his wish granted, to meet his counterpart face to face, live inside the other's skin: "I too would wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate" (143).

Meursault's truth is double-edged, simultaneous with its opposite. It exists on the membrane between two worlds, two societies, between the self and the other. Purportedly a 'response novel' to *The Stranger*, the novel actually establishes a dialectic, the resolution to which is a truth whose epistemology is uncertain. As a final challenge, Harun ponders the possibility of two opposites being true at the same time and the shape of such a dialectical world. Daoud presents this as a choice to the reader, as if the answer might open up a path forward, a transcendence built on contradiction, a shared reality: "Do you find my story suitable? It's all I can offer you. It's my word...It's like the biography of God...no one knows if his story is true or not. The Arab's the Arab, God's God. No name, no initials. Blue overalls and blue sky. Two unknown persons on an endless beach. Which is truer? An intimate question. It's up to you to decide" (143).

What is Daoud asking us to "decide" here, and what are the consequences of this decision? How does reading ostensibly oppositional works as 'dialectical' instead, allow us to rethink

the way in which art comments on identity and alterity? And how does the concept of two texts in "eclipse" inform or parallel the self and the other in the act of dialectical recognition? Considering Camus' and Daoud's intertextual conversation as itself an encounter, informed by Hegel's insights into otherness and the "double movement" of self-consciousness, as well as Immanuel Kant's description of the sublime offers us potential ways to think through these questions. What happens to the epistemology of the self when it collapses into the other? If to encounter otherness is both to be displaced and a requisite for self-consciousness (as Hegel argues), is the self therefore *in itself* a trauma? The rest of this chapter will engage these questions in the context of literary depictions of this 'traumatic' proximity with otherness, beginning with a brief explanation of Hegel's description of self-consciousness.

In the fourth chapter of *The Phenomenology of Mind*⁵⁹, Hegel's famous treatise on dialectics (and other related subjects), he describes "the process of Recognition" (105) as the starting point or catalyst for self-consciousness, i.e. for one's fundamental awareness of one's own distinct subjectivity—and thus for all aspects of what we might upon subsequent reflection

⁵⁹ Alternatively translated as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, a significant difficulty produced by the German word *Geist* which carries both (and other) meanings.

call identity. Like Levinas, Hegel argues that encountering otherness is profoundly consequential for one's understanding of one's place and relationship to the world. Unlike Levinas, however, for Hegel the self and the other are perpetually exchanged in a struggle for mutual recognition, one which does not prioritize, as Levinas does, ethics above all else, but rather makes recognition (and mastery) its focus. Hegel's encounter with otherness traces the first emergence of the "I" through its dialectical relationship with the other. The self, and for the other himself, is negatively determined through reciprocity—I begin where the other ends and he where I end. As Bernardo Ferro summarizes in his essay on Hegel and otherness, "[Hegel's] self-consciousness is never equal to itself. It is what it is through the simultaneous positing of what it is not, i.e., through the positing of an otherness it continuously discards...unlike a fixed entity, the self-conscious self is never simply this or that. Its identity stems from the very act of negating" (3). Hegel refers to this movement of mutual recognition as a "double movement" that takes primacy over all other relations⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ Ferro further clarifies the "double movement" of Hegelian dialectics as a persistent reciprocity, an "infinite coming and going, [in which] *self and other* are both moments of self-consciousness and are both completely dependent upon each other: on the one hand, as if facing a mirror, consciousness can only acknowledge itself as self-consciousness by putting an *other* in front of itself... Self-consciousness is a purely negative entity, which must be conquered anew with each new moment. In light of its self-moving nature, the tautology *I am I* does not really amount to a positive affirmation, but rather to the negative acknowledgment that *I am not*

Levinas' ethics seem, at least ostensibly to approach the encounter with the other from the opposite direction. By prioritizing *responsibility* for the other over reciprocity, Levinas' relationship to the other appears asymmetrical; i.e. it does *not*, as a condition for ethics, demand ethics from the other—I am responsible for the other irrespective of the other's behavior towards me. Thus asymmetry is at the core of the disagreement between Hegel and Levinas, one that ensues from the rules under which the dialectic occurs: "[T]he rupture [between Hegel and Levinas]" Robert Bernasconi writes in trying to resolve the two philosophers, occurs "precisely at the point where Hegelian dialectics attempts to contain the ethical within the bounds of the ontological" (50).

Yet this purported opposition, between Hegel's dialectic as "symmetrical" and Levinas' ethics as "asymmetric", seems nonetheless to itself converge in a higher resolution, one Jacques Derrida calls a "transcendental" truth, an underlying symmetry. In *Writing and Difference* (1967), Derrida argues that the other, in order to *be* an other (for whom I am responsible) must be in the same predicament as myself, i.e. confronted by *my* otherness. In his essay on Levinas, *Violence and Metaphysics*,

another. This *I* of which identity is predicated is nothing more than *what is left* when all otherness was gotten rid of...[yet] by stating that *I am not another*, that same *I* is forever tied to the otherness it seeks to eliminate" (4).

Derrida describes the recognition of the other as a subject, as one for whom I must therefore be responsible, as indispensable in Levinas as in Hegel: "the other, for me, is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as an other...The movement of transcendence toward the other, as invoked by Levinas, would have no meaning if it did not bear within it...[that] I know myself to be other for the other" (157). Without this "transcendental symmetry", were I not to proceed from the belief that the other is "my fellow man as foreigner" (157-159), both self-consciousness (through negation) and the opportunity for ethical relations cannot arise.⁶¹ The stakes, therefore, in the encounter are not only recognizing (or not) the other as subject or even the self becoming conscious of itself (i.e. what Hegel calls the tautology of *I am I*); the very ordering of reality, the coordinates and conditions under which I can posit the existence and viability of subject vs object are in question—a question I can answer only through the other.

In a sense then, Hegel's constellation can be interpreted both an opponent of Levinas' (the dialectical encounter is possible only with *another of myself*, i.e. otherness that is not truly radical or infinite) and as a necessity for Levinas' ethical relationship, in that the other confirms to me my own

⁶¹ This recalls Levinas' disagreement with Husserl about the other as *alter ego* on similar grounds; see my summary from chapter one.

subjectivity and therefore my responsibility for him. The space for metaphysics or transcendence, for a relationship with the other is not a totalization is in this sense opened by the act of mutual recognition. This disagreement need not therefore, be entirely intransigent, at least on these terms. Consider again Victor Frankenstein's anxiety about the creature's subjectivity I detailed in chapter two. The creature oscillates between object (monster) and subject (*alter ego*) and this anxiety is redoubled in Victor as a crisis within himself about himself; the "double movement" on which self-consciousness relies *indefinitely*—not only to recognize but to sustain *I am I*—is disrupted (or rather, *pre-empted*) by the creature's ambivalence as subject/ object. Similarly, Meursault's encounter with the Arab on the beach and Harun's reciprocation of sorts with the Frenchman are each an instance of a disrupted dialectical relationship with the other. Shrouded in darkness (and in the case of the Arab on the beach, deprived of a name), the other remains infinitely so, and the encounter cannot achieve the transcendental symmetry of mutual recognition. Across time, culture and politics, Meursault and Harun, like Camus and Daoud themselves, grapple with the possibility of the other as "my fellow man as foreigner"—*another of myself*—but are left with only suspicion and shadows. And thus both journeys, to find in the other redemption for the self, end in utter failure.

Destabilization or even disintegration of self-consciousness, left wanting of mutual recognition with another of itself, takes on a multitude of forms and variations in literature particularly concerned with national, ethnoreligious or political identity. In the following pages, I consider the possibility of a similar unravelling of the *narrative ego*, i.e. the protagonist or written *self* in its interaction with the imagined other, as depicted in two distant texts: Saadat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) and Don DeLillo's September 11 novel *Falling Man* (2007).

Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" tells the story of an inmate in a Lahore insane asylum "two or three years" (14) after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. We are told by the narrator that the inmate, a Sikh man named Bishan Singh, is called "Toba Tek Singh" by the other inmates, ostensibly after the name of his village. The village, like most in the border provinces during Partition, is presumably in a state of flux, and Bishan Singh and his fellow inmates have no way to corroborate its status and location vis-à-vis the new border between India and Pakistan⁶². His trepidation increases greatly when he learns that the asylum's inmates are soon to be

⁶² The real Toba Tek Singh is today a district in Punjab province, Pakistan, not insignificantly named after a Sikh religious figure.

relocated, on the basis of their religious affiliation, to India or Pakistan. As a Sikh, however, Bishan Singh's place on the continuum between ethnoreligious nation states—and therefore between identities—is ambiguous; he is the living falsification of the binary nature of borders, both physical ones such as between countries and in a metaphysical sense between the self and the other. Recalling Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), with its secluded sanatorium high in the Swiss Alps, for Bishan Singh the asylum in Lahore is a purgatory. As a man belonging to a third religion, whose hometown is a sort of quantum superposition⁶³, he has no way of discerning where he is in time or space, nor where he is eventually meant to go. Likewise, his fellow inmates are uncertain about how to orient themselves without knowing which side of the Partition they exist on. Removed from the drama of the Partition and its aftermath, they are physically trapped in the "meanwhile"; while in the asylum, they wear Levinas' death mask, without future or past.

"Toba Tek Singh" is thus a story of the self, in the form of Bishan Singh, which *begins* in alienation, with a nascent displacement from itself. Where Victor Frankenstein's crisis is engendered by the creature's dubious humanity, for Bishan Singh

⁶³ That is, *functionally* existing in both countries at the same time, until the very end of the story, a sort of geospatial equivalent of Schrödinger's cat, one might say.

this ambivalence is evinced within himself. He cannot determine whether he belongs or is in exile, is master or creature—native or *firanghi*—since, in order to do so, he must rely on his memory of a time before the asylum, that is, a time outside of time. The purgatorial (perhaps, primeval) asylum is the site not only of political disruption, but of a metaphysical crisis which subverts *I am I* with an irresolvable pre-emption, i.e. *which one am I?*

Bishan Singh goes from inmate to inmate in an effort to have them disclose to him this epistemological secret, as if trying to echolocate his avatar, this other *Toba Tek Singh* which has a fixity which he himself does not. Seeking Revelation, he turns to a fellow inmate—who “believed he was God” (17)—for the Word, to resolve the question of the location of Toba Tek Singh the village. “‘It is neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan...because I haven’t given any orders yet’” the man answers. The Word is not ready to be spoken, a hint again that this asylum is a place not only outside of but *before* time. Bishan Singh vainly implores this ‘God’ (Urdu “Khuda”) to “give the orders”, but is told, effectively, to get in line because there are “too many other orders to be taken care of.” Manto here alludes to both the site of and time before Creation (i.e. order), where Bishan and his

fellow inmates, spirits without form⁶⁴, await the Word.

Partition, in Manto's story, invokes the primordial excitation, when essence becomes manifest and heaven and earth coagulate⁶⁵.

Bishan Singh's is a life that has not yet been spoken into existence; "God" has not yet decreed the shape of the earth (and the lands therein), and therefore the fate of the inmates—as regards both identity and form—remains undetermined.

As in the *il y a*, everything in the asylum is jumbled—places names and forms—and the self and other are an anagram of each other. Bishan Singh exhibits symptoms of the "crisis of the double"⁶⁶ with the mantra he vainly repeats to himself (with small contextual variations) and to others, a mangled interpolation of languages and identities within which he tries to glimpse himself: "Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung di daal di of laltain" (16). This hybridity is tied up with his statelessness; he and his fellow inmates are, as Navdeep Kaur notes (368), the embodiment of what Jacques Rancière describes in his political philosophy as *le part sans-part* (the

⁶⁴ See the "Jinn" from Surah Al-Jinn and Surah Al-Hijr (15:27) in the Quran, "And the jinn did We create aforetime of essential fire" (187). See also Genesis 1:2 and discussion in chapter one.

⁶⁵ From the Quran 21:30 Surah al-Anbiyā, of a time before the Word: "Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them" (233).

⁶⁶ Recall Freud's point about the "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" I raise in chapter one, a variation of the uncanny, in which the self "identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own" (233).

part that has no part)⁶⁷. In her essay on the political aesthetics of the story, Kaur describes Singh's utterances as "deterritorialized sound...an amalgamation of Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and English on the one hand, and, on the other hand...a mix of sense and nonsense" (369).

His nonsense refrain though is anything but; as a *sans-part*, an extraneous or superfluous piece, Bishan Singh's speech is—like Bishan himself—a quantum variance, both containing and parasitic on the various languages at play in the politics of Partition. The end of the phrase he utters is adapted slightly each time, according to the conversation and political context: "Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung daal di of di Pakistan government" (16), or "Oper di gur gur di bay dhanian di mung di daal di of wahay guruji, the khalsa and wahay guruji the fathey! (17), etc. The phrase seems to double as both meaningful and meaningless, or recalling Blanchot, as both "crude" and essential".⁶⁸ For Bishan Singh, the act of speaking at once pulls him closer to self-consciousness and pushes it away. Not unlike

⁶⁷ Rancière's observation in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (and other writings) about the nature of political representation in democracies seems to speak directly to Bishan Singh's plight, i.e. as a living embodiment of the unrepresentable exception which is always essentialized—and thus lost—in the act of 'speaking for' that underwrites all political organization and the very idea of nation state. Writes Rancière, politics "does not recognize relationships between citizens and the state. It only recognizes the mechanisms and singular manifestations by which a certain citizenship occurs but never belongs to individuals as such...Man is not some future accomplishment beyond political representation. He is the truth hidden beneath this representation" (31; 83).

⁶⁸ See chapter two for this distinction, i.e. language as utility/ learned signification vs language as innovation, as soundscape.

Derrida's *différance*, Bishan Singh has been estranged not only from place but also from language, from the signified for which he vainly seeks the correct vernacular signifier. Even a very rudimentary understanding of Partition must, after all, still include the rending apart of languages, dialects and vernaculars as well as territory. Words, in many ways the instrument not only of social cohesion but of developing and sustaining identities, were scattered across the new border along with the peoples that spoke them. In the asylum, Bishan Singh must sound out both the distance between himself and otherness *and* the difference, speaking (like Mrs. Moore) a fragmentary language into the darkness to learn where he ends and the other begins.

Manto's story culminates with Bishan Singh's abrupt (literal and symbolic) death. We learn that India and Pakistan have agreed, on the basis of religion, to exchange and repatriate their respective "lunatics" across the new border. Most of the inmates in the Lahore asylum are opposed to being sent to India "because they [cannot] comprehend the reasons for being uprooted from one place and thrown into another" (18). For Bishan Singh, however, occupying the Sikh "third space" in the dialectical opposition represented by Partition ties his identity entirely to his hometown, which effectively exists nowhere and anywhere. For him, the possibility of being relocated to Toba Tek Singh, his namesake, thus represents not only restitution but a

"solution" to the question of his hybridity⁶⁹.

At the border, Bishan Singh is ostensibly finally apprised of the location of Toba Tek Singh the village. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asks of a border official, "In Pakistan or in India?" (18) Yet the dual nature of this question (given the double entendre of the name) is left unresolved and leads ultimately to his demise. "In Pakistan" the official responds cryptically, a statement that could apply to the village or to Bishan himself. Taking this to mean the village lies on the Pakistan side, and thus that he is being transported to the wrong side, Bishan Singh attempts to flee back across the border but is restrained. He ultimately perishes mysteriously, "in a place between the borders...[i]n the middle [Urdu: *darmeeyan*], on a stretch of land that had no name" (18-19) where he is discovered the next morning.

The implications of this death, occurring as it does in a literal interstice—along the *membrane*—are manifold. Hegel seems to anticipate this very moment in *Phenomenology of Mind* when he describes a self-consciousness which, in approaching the other, "has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being" (105). Bishan Singh's death is at once an act of political

⁶⁹ To slightly extend my quantum mechanics analogy, a collapsing of several possible states into a single one.

resistance⁷⁰, and a more fundamental destabilization of concept of "border" as a division between two antagonisms, such as the self and the other. The ground Bishan Singh stakes out seems to buttress Manto's comment on subjectivity as being ultimately indivisible, as the surplus *object a* (i.e. the remainder) in the oppositional framework. Further, I read the border, both as psychology and as text, as a traumatic site wherein the self and other not only meet but interpolate, such that a space for a metaphysical and symmetrical relationship with the other becomes possible (as in Derrida's reading of Hegel's transcendental symmetry). To understand Bishan Singh's death as a result of this violence of "border", I first explore the idea of border as physical and—more contentiously—as metaphysical trauma and then present a crucial variation on this point, a very different boundary or membrane, from Don DeLillo's September 11 novel *Falling Man*.

Jennifer Yusin has described the semiotics of the "border", as a "geography of trauma" (454), of which the 1947 border between India and Pakistan is an obviously apposite instance. Citing Freud's formulation of *Nachträglichkeit* (the

⁷⁰ As Kaur explains, his death "opens up a space where anyone can be counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part" (370).

'afterwardness' or retroactive nature of experiencing trauma)⁷¹, Yusin explains that 'locating' trauma in the case of Partition remains difficult, as the trauma of Partition lies in "the [very] impossibility of locating and knowing the event as a trauma" (456). The physical and psychical ruptures created by *borders* thus produce trauma which itself constitutes a yawning, an in-between, as Yusin puts it, a "gap between knowing and unknowing" (459) its own provenance.

What exists in this gap—in my estimation, the very "darmeeyan" in which Bishan Singh perishes—between trauma and its realization, is a nightscape which recalls Blanchot in that it is the space where Bishan Singh's search for an "essential" rather than "crude" language finds resolution. "Toba Tek Singh is here!" (18), he exclaims as the guards attempt to force him back across the border. What Bishan Singh realizes is "here", I argue, is not his village but *himself*; it refers neither to India nor to Pakistan, but rather to the *darmeeyan*, the gap. Within the dialectical opposition of nation states, the border

⁷¹ As Freud details in "Studies on Hysteria" (with Josef Breuer) and elsewhere, trauma by definition overwhelms consciousness insofar as its ability to process and interpret the traumatic event as it is happening. Trauma thus enters the psyche and is relocated into the subconscious, whereby it becomes by nature deferred, i.e. activated inadvertently and belatedly within a psyche which cannot locate (recall) its point of origin. As Bistoën, Vanheule and Craps explain: "an initial event only becomes traumatic, in the sense of exerting its full pathogenic power, at a later stage in psychical development, when the initial event to which the subject was unable to react adequately is revived by a subsequent encounter. *Nachträglichkeit* thus refers to the process by which pathology develops following a trauma that is constituted through *two* etiological moments instead of one" (672).

represents both their separation and their collapse⁷², so that in discovering (or as Freud might say, *rediscovering*) the site of trauma, Bishan Singh's quest for self-consciousness returns to its primordial antagonism, i.e. to the encounter which first results in *I am I*. The encounter with the other is the metaphysical twin of the opposition of *border*, since, as I have discussed earlier, it is a (traumatic) precursor to achieving self-consciousness. As a Sikh in a political crisis primarily involving Muslims and Hindus, Bishan Singh's body is, as Hugo Baumgartner's was, the *object a*, the third that belies the two, undermines their distinctness and reveals the violence inherent in this division. "[T]he I," as Yusin summarizes, "is put radically into question by the other in which the putting into question of one's being, of one's self-identification, is at once recuperated and constituted as the consciousness of being put into question" (464).⁷³ Bishan Singh's death in no man's land ultimately represents both the indivisibility of subjectivity into two perfect halves and—relatedly—the volatility of self-consciousness, whose gestation and subsistence *always* exists at the border between the self and other.

⁷² Into each other, that is, semiotically and metaphysically.

⁷³ Levinas makes a very similar point in his essay "The Trace of the Other" (1963), "[The face of the other] is a matter of the putting into question of consciousness, and not of a consciousness of a being put into question. [In encountering the face of the other] The I loses its sovereign coincidence with itself, its identification, in which consciousness returned triumphantly to itself and rested on itself" (353).

Of course, it follows then that this epistemic violence which shadows *border* is not exclusive (or restricted) to the physical, territorial, symbolic or even psychic type. As Hegel's double movement defines and Manto's story reminds us, the self is always contested and in contention with otherness. The rewriting of borders by the Partition of the subcontinent short-circuits Bishan Singh's identification with *I am I*; yet another insinuation of Manto's story is that this disruption is a universal human condition, implied by the very imminence of the other as a challenge to the sovereignty of the self. I read narrative instances of this challenge or calling into question as raising a crucial problem which (keeping in mind my discussion in chapter two about embedded meaning vs the meaning apprehended by 'approaching' art in a particular way) can incite a similar feeling of self-doubt, even *sublimity* for the reader. Decades later and culturally far removed yet almost as if a nod to Manto's symbolically rich story, Don DeLillo's September 11 novel *Falling Man* takes up similar questions about the "geography of trauma" and the disintegration of the membranous 'walls' of self.

Falling Man is, as its title indicates, a novel about loss and accounting for loss. Though considered a lesser, even insubstantial work in DeLillo's oeuvre and by no means a definitive novelization of the September 11 attacks (if one

exists), *Falling Man* is singular perhaps for that very reason, in that it is both noticeably unambitious (in terms of trying to encompass the whole of the event or making any big statements) and, in terms of its prose, the least like DeLillo's other works. Eschewing in large part his familiar rhetorical flourishes and obsessions with minutia and metadata, it instead trades predominately in stunned silences, evasions and a pervading sense of incompleteness. *Falling Man* is a quiet book about a very loud subject, mirroring in a sense the traumatic detachment of its fictionalized New Yorkers after enduring and surviving the attacks. "[H]e has gutted his style sentence by sentence" (Versluys 47), one critic notes of the texture of the book's prose, a study in extreme rhetorical restraint. Sentences are short, almost truncated; adjectives are sparse, as if rendered impotent by the magnitude of the event. In the maelstrom of the falling towers, pronouns are preferred over names, as though names have been swallowed up. Linda Kauffman describes the parallel tracks of narrative and rhetorical emptiness thusly: "[the novel's characters] are obsessed with disintegration: psychic, spatial, temporal, national, and marital. The novel is a sustained meditation on time, chance, loss, and mutability" (367).⁷⁴

⁷⁴ "He started walking again" (5); "He signed a document, then another" (15); "He had no sense of pace or rate" (245); "He tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (6).

Fragmentation and interruption abide. DeLillo's characters, in the wake of the attack, begin sentences they do not finish, retrace steps without finding their way, perform rehabilitative rituals without understanding their injuries. The respiratory rhythm of the novel is the transmutation of suffering and loss into amnesia, as if the maximum threshold of trauma has been exceeded, leaving behind not grief but catatonia. Like the attacks themselves, the amnesia reverberates on levels both intimate and national. Time is one of the casualties: the novel's temporality is measured in terms of time elapsed since a new, terrible zero point, days survived since and "after the planes" (8; 34; 69). Evoking the Fall from Genesis 3 to which its title of course directly alludes, time in *Falling Man* endures a traumatic rebirth marked by a second Fall. "[T]hese after-days," one character reflects, "These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after" (137-138), like some mockery of the Creation, the attack a debased, localized Big Bang.

Keith Neudecker, the protagonist, is both an avatar of Freud's melancholic⁷⁵ and a kind of watermark of Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim from *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). After escaping the reeling buildings at the book's outset, Keith spends much of

⁷⁵ See Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917).

the remaining pages unmoored, in a stricken state of searching for the many things he has lost without being able to name them. His injuries, physical, psychic and existential, seem to recede from his gaze and so remain untreated, recalling Freud's melancholic who knows he has lost something, but cannot identify what it was⁷⁶. And, like Billy Pilgrim, narrative time around him seems to warp, as if protectively folding itself around the site of his traumatic experience.

Keith's arc in the novel is actually a circle; the novel is bookended by his vision of looking up at debris, rubble, and "things he could not name" (246) falling from the tower as it teeters on the verge of imminent collapse. This moment, in "the light of what comes after", seems to exist eternally, in some shard broken off from the normal flow of time, narrative and memory. The feeling of being, as Vonnegut put it in *Slaughterhouse*, "unstuck in time" (21) becomes and remains *Falling Man's* temporal interstice, its untimed life. As Keith looks on, the final image we are left with (instead of the eponymous falling man from the famous Associated Press photo from which the novel takes its title)⁷⁷, is an empty shirt

⁷⁶ Freud writes that "the [melancholic] patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost...even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia [he does so] only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him (245).

⁷⁷ Richard Drew's famous AP photo of the unidentified victim falling from the North Tower, almost devotional in its quality, was first published in *The New York Times* the day after the attacks. It was, in fact, one of several the photographer took of the man. The other photos show the same figure in various stages of freefall, his

falling from the sky, its "arms waving like nothing in this life." The disappearance of the traumatized body into the empty shirt marks a final dematerialization which matches the novel's cadence. The penetrative force of the event, DeLillo suggests—its strain on the fabric of the real—exceeded what could be borne by the triumvirate pillars of time, self-consciousness and the body.⁷⁸

Keith's slow recovery from his injuries is measured incrementally, in a series of repetitive rehabilitation exercises, wrist, arm, and hand (230). "These were the true countermeasures to the damage he'd suffered in the tower," he reflects, "These were the dead and maimed" (40). These mysterious, almost religious observances, "fragments shored

body contorted, his limbs flailing as he fell. Yet only one photo achieved widespread attention and a kind of cultural transcendence, the one referenced by DeLillo's novel. This photo shows the man vertically aligned against the beams of the North Tower behind him, statue straight *as if suspended in midair*, as though he were falling serenely and uniformly. This eternal falling, the traumatized body and the traumatic moment as still-life, again reminds me of Levinas' eternal image, the image as the epitaph for the "death of each instant" ("Reality" 141). This is the symbolic iconography of DeLillo's novel and its characters, i.e. neither life nor death, but something in between, an ephemerality without a resolution. The falling man in the photo falls eternally, as the victims in DeLillo's book suffer eternally, each awaiting the restitution of the temporal which the "meanwhile" cannot provide them.

⁷⁸ Like other such images, the series of photographs Richard Drew produced of the falling man (and of others that fell or jumped from the towers) were quickly suppressed by US media in the days and weeks after the attack, and have largely disappeared from national memory. The photos have rarely, if ever, reappeared in print, after the *Times* and other outlets faced a public outcry about their provocative and arguably insensitive nature. As Tom Junod recently wrote for *Esquire*, the surreptitious circulation of these images afterward became a transgression specifically because it exceeds restraints of decency, so that "it is impossible to look at them without attendant feelings of shame and guilt." There was a sense that something not only terrible but also unspeakable had happened, whose documentation *and witnessing* were a violation of the sacred intimate. "In a nation of voyeurs," Junod observes, "the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers' experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten."

against [the] ruins" ("The Wasteland" 71), Eliot might say, are a narrative counterweight to the periodic appearances of a performance artist in various locations around New York, another 'falling man'. Using suspension cables, the performance artist silently and indecently recreates the posture of the falling man from the AP photo before unsuspecting crowds of New Yorkers in the wake of the event (33; 168; 219-222). Like Keith with his rehabilitation exercises, the performance artist tries to contain what is otherwise overwhelming within a coherent pattern, a repository for the traumatic memory and a way to bring the event back to its zero point: the injury itself.

Similarly, hereditary Alzheimer's disease stalks Lianne, Keith's ex-wife, who works with Alzheimer's patients and ritually checks herself against the disease by counting back from a hundred by sevens (187-188, 207). Ritual features recurrently in the novel as a buffer against disintegration. Characters strain to give a shape or a name to what has happened to them, and rituals take the place of directly remembering or speaking about the event. Each of these rituals provide a measure of certainty, a kind of insular, self-sustaining ideology to replace the grand narratives of identity and nationhood, all irrevocably lost in the attack.⁷⁹ If the nation

⁷⁹ Of course, the cost of this collective amnesia is a near total depoliticization of the attack and its chain of causality. As Sven Cvek has argued, memory loss is a device DeLillo uses to null the geopolitical backdrop

is an analog of the self, the America that *Falling Man* describes is as alien to its characters as they are to themselves.

"[America] is losing the center," Lianne's mother's estranged partner muses, evoking Yeats, "I don't know this America anymore. I don't recognize it...There's an empty space where America used to be" (191-193). "Empty space" is DeLillo's primary subject here, the physical and emotional vacuum that September 11 represents. As Kauffman writes of these mediations, *Falling Man* is a study of people "losing the storylines of their own existence" (367).

In an earlier essay for *Harper's Magazine* titled "In the Ruins of the Future", first published in December of 2001 and later reprinted in *The Guardian*, DeLillo anticipated some of the movements of the novel he would publish six years later. The essay is comprised mainly of reflections on ordinary New Yorkers living through and coping with the attack. Instead of masses, DeLillo tells the stories of individuals "trying not to look around, only what's immediate, one step and then another, all closely focused, a pregnant woman, a newborn, a dog." Like *Falling Man*, the essay is concerned with fragmentary stories within the grand spectacle, eschewing the political and public for the personal and intimate. "[T]hese are among the smaller

behind the event, tearing it out of the pages of history, allowing for "a disappearance of history from the site of trauma...[an] evacuation of historical discourse" (209).

objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day" DeLillo summarizes his reflections, "We need them...to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practised response."

As *Falling Man* later confirmed, this choice on his part seems to be driven by an understanding of trauma that echoes Freud's melancholia. The traumatic impact of event, the injuries it afflicts, are too painful to be swallowed whole. To find some perspective, they must be absorbed piecemeal, individually. Paradoxically however, this insularity impedes the full immensity of the loss from coming ever into view. For the melancholic, who has sustained "too powerful" a loss to be able to mourn it "successfully"⁸⁰, self-preservation demands a defence against the traumatic memory, which in *Falling Man* takes the form of the attack disappearing into a vacuum of amnesia and speechlessness⁸¹.

⁸⁰ In Freud's terms, a "healthy" and therefore finite period of mourning, after which "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" ("Mourning" 244)

⁸¹ The confounding of speech, as a result of a symbolic 'fall' raises another possible reading of the multitudes contained within *Falling Man's* title, another 'Fall' from Genesis: not from Eden, but from (and of) the Tower of Babel. Where the first Fall was from Heaven, the second was of the unity of early Mankind, previously held together by one common language but now "confound[ed]" by God before it can complete a tower to reach Heaven, and thence scattered forever into warring tribes (see Genesis 11: 1-9). This traumatic "Fall" of language is thus also a loss of nation and purpose, bolstering it at as a possible secondary allusion of the novel's title.

What are the consequences of this traumatic overwhelming of time, consciousness, and the body as concerns the interaction of self and other? Put more simply, how does one understand the other from within a self that is traumatized? Recall that Hegel's description of 'self-consciousness' is always incomplete, i.e. a moment to moment proposition. Though his point was phenomenological and so quite apart from psychoanalysis, it bears mentioning that Freud's melancholic who cannot say what he has lost comprises an equally traumatized self-consciousness. Like DeLillo's Keith Neudecker or Manto's Bishan Singh, the self so traumatized is one that cannot perceive (or confirm) its own furthest limits, its frontier (where *I* end and otherness begins), since it is this very *frontier* that is the site of the trauma.

For Bishan Singh, the territory of trauma is the *darmeeyan*, the space between borders. For Keith Neudecker it takes a more subtle form, one described by *Falling Man's* climactic moments and the language in which DeLillo describes them. It is also in these moments that the two texts, DeLillo's and Manto's (like Camus' and Daoud's in the moment their two murders align), seem to reach across time and recognize each other.

Falling Man's antagonist, a negative image of Keith's perspective, is the viewpoint of a fictionalized version of one of the 9/11 hijackers, Hammad, written in omniscient third

person. The two subjectivities are oppositional and yet inexorably linked. The novel is in a sense a description of the space between their polarities and its resolution the violent closing of this distance. Hammad, though, is more conflicted than a generic fanatic. That role is performed by Amir, his overseer of sorts, a direct rendering of lead 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta⁸². Soon after we are introduced to him, we also encounter Hammad's ideological ambivalence, his doubtfulness about the coalescing plot. His wavering faith, which is repeatedly checked by Amir's single-mindedness, manifests itself as a failure to observe sexual prohibitions (and his ensuing guilt), as well as other concerns about the dependence of a 'pure' faith on the purification of the body. He examines his inner conflicts and his public visage, unsure that he and the person meant to carry out the attacks are one and the same ("He spent time at the mirror looking at his beard, knowing he was not supposed to trim it") (82). His mind wanders during sermons, drifting toward sexual opportunities ("he kept thinking that another woman would come by on a bike, someone to look at, hair wet, legs pumping") (78). Amir reprimands him for maintaining a relationship with "a shameless woman" (83), whom he must disavow in order to quiet his anxieties about himself, the disharmony

⁸² "His full name was Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta" (80).

between his impulses and performative ideology⁸³. Strict doctrinal observance and self-monitoring function as Hammad's ritual sanctification, measuring himself against a fundamentalist ideal his sacrament. "The beard would look better if he trimmed it," he ruefully reflects, "But there were rules now and he was determined to follow them...He had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, first" (83).

DeLillo's rather paint-by-numbers psychological profile here is of a would-be terrorist who is clearly not impervious to internal contradictions simply by virtue of belonging to a terror cell. He is able to maintain his grasp on the ontological (dogmatic) enactment of his persona only by sublimation, i.e. by confirming the self as fundamentally an effacement and therefore a trauma *whose nascence must be forgotten*⁸⁴. Hammad is thus a complicated 'antagonist', if indeed he can be called one at all.

⁸³ This rather unimaginative, depoliticized rendering of the terrorist as essentially sexual repression personified is a significant weakness of DeLillo's novel, yet one that appears more or less unchanged in other novelizations, such as, for instance, John Updike's *Terrorist*, published a year earlier. The latter's drawing of a Muslim American teenager who becomes embroiled in a plot to blow up the Lincoln tunnel driven by his sexual inhibitions is a near template for DeLillo's Hammad.

⁸⁴ In chapter two of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud defines sublimation, especially of the sexual variety thusly: "Another method of guarding against pain is by...transferring the instinctual aims into such directions that they cannot be frustrated by the outer world. Sublimation of the instincts lends an aid in this" (33). Similarly, in *The Ego & the Id*, he more or less explains DeLillo's depiction of the 'uncertain terrorist' as sexually self-abnegating: "The transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido which thus takes place obviously implies an abandonment of sexual aims, a process of desexualisation; it is consequently a kind of sublimation. Indeed, the question arises, and deserves careful consideration, whether this is not always the path taken in sublimation, whether all sublimation does not take place through the agency of the ego, which

His opposition to Keith is asymmetrical, in that he represents not refutation but a tacit confirmation that the self is a (contested) ontology, requiring constant *and ritual* affirmation to be precariously sustained. "What is the difference" Amir chastises Hammad about his transgressions, "between you and all the others, outside our space?" (83) DeLillo seems to ask this question to the wider world, the unspoken and disquieting answer perhaps only that Hammad and his co-conspirators have chosen an explicitly violent ideology to repress the contradictions that are always inherent to the doubt-laden enterprise of self.

Falling Man's narrative is, in a manner of speaking, hermetically sealed; it begins, ends and is distended by the same traumatic event. Hammad's story is obviously driven through by grim inevitability, both ideologically and narratively oriented deathward. Keith, too, seems propelled by something unseen towards a reckoning, back to the moment of violent collision with the other. Having survived the attacks to begin the novel, he remains emotionally adrift throughout its pages. Lianne's recollection of him after the attacks is that of a disembodied figure, "floating in reflected light, Keith in pieces, in small strokes" (127). If the collapse of the towers represents Keith's alienation from his own body, his

begins by changing sexual object-libido into narcissistic libido and then, perhaps, goes on to give it another aim" (21-22).

rehabilitation exercises are a way to restore him to it, to the extent that they bring him back to a direct relationship with (and control over) his own form, limbs, breath. The distance that his psychic injury introduces between mind and body is ritually arrested, in an attempt to resurrect the body as the site of confrontation and injury. The exercises, Keith discovers, impel him not away from but *toward* the other, in his strangeness, as he practices them “four times a day”, like “an odd set of extensions and flexions that resembled prayer in some remote northern province, among a repressed people” (59).

These two internally unstable subjectivities ultimately confront each other at the novel’s conclusion, in a bifurcated flashback of the attacks wherein Keith and Hammad’s viewpoints virtually dissolve into each other. Hammad’s narrative, from aboard one of the planes, disappears mid-paragraph into a “blast wave...that [sends] Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall” (239). The viewpoint ostensibly shifts, oddly without interruption, to Keith’s perspective, but with the exclusive use of pronouns concealing any clear point of demarcation or narrative transfer, as if the characters briefly lose recourse even to their own names⁸⁵. As the tower staggers from the impact,

⁸⁵ An interesting variation of this device appears in one of *Falling Man*’s contemporaries, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), whose unnamed characters occupy a traumatized world—and *text*—that reduces them to simply “the man” and “the boy” for the novel’s entirety, as if to use a name in such a world would be to utter an obscenity.

the reader strains to understand whose perception of the turmoil is being described, whether the traumatized body being glimpsed in the maelstrom is Keith's or Hammad's ("He found himself walking into a wall...[t]he floor began to slide beneath him and he lost his balance...[h]e thought he saw the ceiling begin to ripple...[h]e was losing things as they happened") (239-240). The world around the two seems not to clearly 'belong' to, or be *intended* by, either consciousness, as if the text itself has shattered and lost track of its subjects as they twist violently around each other. This final obnubilation, the losing of distinct narrative threads, or more accurately, their entwining, intensifies the novel's traumatic impact. *Falling Man's* world loses form and distinctness not because of the inherent sameness of its components but rather the dissipation of their distinct characteristics. The enervating effect of the novel's anemic prose is thus itself the result of the near featureless world left behind by the attacks.⁸⁶

I argue that this resolution is a moment where *I am I* is overcome by *which one am I?*, an "indeterminateness"...[of] no determined being [where] anything can count for anything else..."

⁸⁶ As Alessandra De Marco writes, "the collapse of the towers produces a physical vacuum, a spatial correlative of the psychic emptiness generated by the loss of thousands of lives" (16).

(Existence 58-59).⁸⁷ The final image of the empty shirt, falling from heaven without the man who wore it, represents this dematerialization most clearly, and in doing so returns us to the *il y a*. The site of the ruined towers observes these very tenets of the *il y a*, and the other, symbolically rendered most radically as *terrorist*, invades, penetrates, and destabilizes the boundaries of self, not merely with imminence, but with the possibility of an *immanence*. The violence of the act of terror, in other words, not only threatens an over-proximity, it calls into question the very survival—and assumption—of an always autonomous, self-determining subject at the center of consciousness, i.e. from whose perspective *terror* is perceived. This, perhaps, is why DeLillo chooses to “gut” his style, why the novel’s prose is so emaciated: it is the sound of the muted voice of the lost subject in the middle of perception.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Recall Levinas’ description of “indeterminateness” I cited in chapter one, an “obscure invasion [in which] it is impossible to take shelter in oneself [and] what we call the I is itself submerged by the night.”

⁸⁸ A good part of Samuel Beckett’s middle period oeuvre, in particular *Watt* and *The Unnameable* (both published in 1953) can be read as a literary experiment in similarly desiccating both the empirical and ideal center at the heart of narrative origination. As P.J. Murphy has extensively detailed, Beckett was a careful and thorough reader of Kant during the 1930s and engaged Kant’s *Critique* in much of his writing from the period, in particular the latter’s “Copernican Revolution” which inverted the order of perception from object (things-in-themselves) to subject. *Watt*’s titular character becomes an unlikely servant in the house of the elusive and absent Mr. Knott, whom Murphy reads as a clear reference to Kant, “a double negative whereby Beckett punningly sorts “can’t” from “cant,” the knowable from the unknowable” (199). Beckett describes Watt’s vain search for something to center himself in Mr. Knott’s allegorical house; on the house’s many peculiarities, such as the strange exchange between the Gall piano-tuners, Watt’s condition seems especially Kantian: “Watt did not know what happened...But he felt the need to think that such and such a that had happened then, the need to be able to say, when the scene began to unroll its sequences, Yes, I remember, that is what happened then” (61). Failing that, he considers the possibility of the world contained within the house as *a priori*, but without any faith in the transcendental enterprise, this does not take hold either (“Watt could not accept

The retreating of the mind into its deepest reaches and reserves as a self-preserving response to the rupture caused by an overwhelming experience naturally brings to mind Immanuel Kant's formulation of the experience of the sublime. In his third critique, the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, Kant describes the 'sublime' as not simply an experience that exceeds the imagination or the senses, nor as delimited to the *feeling* of being in some sense overwhelmed, but rather as a peculiar pleasure or displeasure ensuing from the relationship of consciousness to the world it perceives, or perhaps of self to *not-self*.⁸⁹ Kant compares the distinction between a "disinterested" appreciation of beauty and the more *sensual* gratification that may be derived from it (the latter being too informed by and devoted to desire to allow for dispassionate aesthetic consideration), to a parallel differentiation between

them for what they perhaps were"). In *The Unnameable*, which dispenses entirely with a differentiation between phenomenal and noumenal, Beckett takes up Kant's proposition directly, only to find the transcendental subject impossibly entangled in language. The subject at the center of synthetic *a priori* judgement, Beckett seems to imply, is an impossibility, at least as an expression in language. Murphy summarizes: "The Unnameable asserts that he is at the center and does not move...But as this novel spirals away from any would-be authorial control, it is excruciatingly obvious that there is no way to speak in a 'transcendental' manner about an originating self since the very nature of language itself in its imaginative capacities ineluctably generates a host of fictional projections which need somehow to be accommodated" (204). Murphy reckons this Beckett's "endarkenment" (207), ostensibly a turn away from reason and toward "pure imagination", as evidenced by the author's own admission in a 1956 interview to being a "non-knower, a non-can-er", an author who was "not master of [his] own material" ("An Interview with Beckett" 148).

⁸⁹ This is admittedly a specific reading of Kant largely informed by traditional phenomenology, which significantly differs from structuralist, empirical or myriad other readings. To these possibilities as well as the many other aspects of the sublime in Kant (such as the distinction between the mathematically and dynamically sublime) I have little to usefully contribute, and as they do not directly interact with my discussion, except perhaps tangentially, I do not take them up herein.

fear and the sublime. Where fear primarily elicits the instinct to survive (fight-or-flight etc.), the sublime experience is one that occurs at a contemplative distance, from a posture that allows the rational mind to 'witness' the senses. "Just as we cannot pass judgment on the beautiful if we are seized by inclination and appetite," Kant explains, "so we cannot pass judgment at all on the sublime in nature if we are afraid" (120).⁹⁰ The feeling of sublimity, for Kant, is borne of this detachment, by confirming to the subject the presence of a rational, ineffable mind—irreducible to the senses—which is able to contemplate the danger, that is, rationally examine *its own fear*. The same experience that overwhelms the senses is made an object of study by the reasoning mind, which thus perceives itself as standing above nature.

Kant's examples, like his view of the sublime in general, all concern nature: hurricanes, volcanos, thunder and lightning, an overhanging rock (120). Yet he maintains that it is not the threat posed by these phenomena in and of themselves, i.e. some quality they possess or threshold they exceed, that produces the feeling of the sublime. The sublime is the distance (and the distancing) from the senses which experience these events and

⁹⁰ Whether Kant intends to privilege exclusively nature or God as agents of the sublime, as most of his examples at least suggest, or more broadly any phenomena that can induce such feelings is difficult to ascertain. I take the latter position in my reading, as most phenomenological scholars have done.

the mind that considers them. The terms Kant uses to describe this higher mind seem to me to almost disembody it (though this would contradict a phenomenological understanding), as an infinity witnessing finitude:

Compared to the might of any of these [natural phenomena], our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle...[yet] we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul's fortitude⁹¹ above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind...For although we found our own limitation when we considered the immensity of nature...yet we also found, in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard that has this infinity itself under it as a unit; and since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small, we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. In the same way...it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation...(120-121)

⁹¹ Kant uses the word "Seelenstärke", literally, "strength of soul".

What is essential in this understanding, in spite of Kant's focus on nature, is that although it may have catalysts in the world, the *feeling* of the sublime occurs in the subject. The particular awesome aspect in the world is thus largely subjective, decoupled from the feeling it produces which is instead a result of the mind 'retreating' from the inundated senses. As Richard Kearney has written, reading Kant, "it is because our mind discovers unsuspected depths within itself in the face of some immeasurable menace outside of us that we feel 'sublime'...The sublime may be understood, consequently, as an experience in the mode of the imaginary rather than of the real" (38-39).

We must thus at least entertain the possibility of the sublime that is not induced by nature, but may arise from any event that produces for the senses the feeling of being deluged. Kant himself states flatly that "sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind", and that the sublime realization is "[when] we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us" (123). Furthermore, the question of whether detachment from or "disinterestedness" in the event actually requires physical safety, or whether it can otherwise manifest is

one Kant also considers, as (for instance) in the case of war⁹², or as Kearney does, mass terror. These possibilities effectively further isolate the sublime at its most basic as a certain response of the 'witness' to preserve itself from what is overwhelming *whether or not* it is directly threatened, as by imminent injury or death, especially on an awe-inspiring scale.

A more layered, though not necessarily contrasting, interpretation of the traumatized figures of Keith Neudecker here comes into view, not as consciousness simply shattered by the overwhelming act of terror, but as one that has retreated in the face of the (terribly) sublime. We catch a glimpse of him, walking numbly through the rubble of the collapsed towers, in Kearney's description of "uniformed soldiers marching through the valley of death...their sublime indifference stemming from an uncanny detachment from the violence all around them as they evince an almost superhuman endurance of suffering" (39-40). In his rehabilitative rituals—the silent repetitions of which allow him to retain a distance from suffering, or rather, *to observe himself suffering*—we perceive what Friedrich Schiller, following Kant, described as a "sublime composure", an "independence of

⁹² "Even war has something sublime about it if it is carried on in an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizens' rights. At the same time it makes the way of thinking of a people that carries it on in this way all the more sublime in proportion to the number of dangers in the face of which it courageously stood its ground" (122).

spirit in a state of suffering" (59).⁹³ And, moreover, it is this very independence of the mind that perceives and bears witness to its own experience that is the position from which art, i.e. aesthetic consideration, is made possible.

Kearney explains that, at least so far as Kant's formulation of sublimity is concerned, the composure of the independent spirit "in the very midst of terror" (39) is not unlike the "aesthetic distance" from which we behold a traumatic event from afar, as in the case of "fictional or theatrical accounts of terror." The occurrence of events or existence of phenomena from which one is at a "safe" distance, but which nonetheless engulf the senses and imagination incite a similar contradiction between sensory and the aesthetic experience. The experience of those who witnessed the events of September 11 on television is instructive therefore, as an instance of being thuswise at a safe distance from what is still traumatic to the imagination, as Kearney describes, a "double experience of: (1) suffering 'as if' [we are] *present* to the terror...and (2) detachment by virtue of [our] real absence from the scene itself" (41). Similarly, DeLillo's fictional New Yorkers, like their real life

⁹³ Literary attempts to depict this inner fortitude in the face of the gravest dangers are innumerable; one is reminded of Langston Hughes' war poetry, certain of Hemingway's characters, perhaps, as in Lieutenant Henry's emotionally detached non-response to Catherine's death in *A Farewell to Arms* (297), or Robert Jordan's stoic death at the conclusion of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* ["holding onto himself very carefully and delicately" (490)]—dispassionately calm centres in the storm.

counterparts, seem to all experience the event from the same direction and distance, to be collectively and simultaneously within its orbit in a way which does not necessarily rely on their individual proximity to it. All senses, whether belonging to victims or witnesses, are confounded at once.

Further, there is also the level at which we, as readers, recall the event in our own memories and the dread, almost like vertigo, that we feel at being returned to it even if we lived it only through media. *Falling Man* thus also raises important questions about the relationship between experience and feeling, whether and to what extent the latter is as tied to the former as we might typically believe. Though Kant maintained that the sublime exists only in the subject, his attribution of nature as the primary source of the sublime feeling leaves the matter somewhat unresolved. The idea of a subject who experiences the sublime within him or herself also again broaches the question of 'where' aesthetic discovery is located (i.e. in subject or object), whether it is an act of discovery, reflection, or *realization* through interaction and negotiation with the world. And, if the considering of art is, as it is often described, a sublime experience, is art itself then a twin of nature, capable of assailing and overwhelming our faculties without actually destroying us as well? Or is it that art is the *harnessing* of what is unimaginable or incomprehensible in nature, and indeed

the world, and that what separates it from everyday experience is its potential to trespass on consciousness, to transgress and disarm us? Might this be what separates 'good' art from 'bad', or consecrate moments in lived experience that qualify as 'artistic', a sort of unmapped semi-distance between the objective (embedded) and subjective (phenomenological) aspects of *reality*?

And what of the other, who simultaneously confirms and threatens the sanctity of self? The other's incursion (as *Falling Man's* final encounter most violently shows) results in the self seeking out a safe vantage point which appears identical, or at least adjacent, to the place from which the mind witnesses the sublime in nature or the aesthetic distance from which we contemplate art. Is otherness then a lost sibling, the third panel of a triptych (with art and nature) that folds into a single truth about experience?

Or maybe, it is more correct to think of art as messenger or prophet, the bearer of many terrible secrets that reveal to us the strangeness of nature *and* the otherness of the other. Perhaps the accumulated lesson of *The Stranger*, *The Meursault Investigation*, "Toba Tek Singh" and *Falling Man* is that the moment the self (as narrative ego) recoils from the encroachment of the other and discovers its inner defenses, i.e. the separation of body and *spirit*, is the very moment it experiences

the sublime. And this is the feeling that art seeks to explore and lay bare but is not separate from, as a triptych folds into itself. In the chapter that follows, I probe these questions and others that arise from a consideration of the 'artistic moment', its scarcity or abundance and the impression it leaves on us.

*"We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each has built a prison" (346)
- T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* original manuscript⁹⁴*

⁹⁴ In the finished poem, Eliot replaces "has built" with "confirms" (70). Taking both meanings together as call and response (both the creation and *perpetuation* of the self) is especially revealing I feel, referring us back to Hegel's double movement, i.e. the self that requires thinking of "the key" of otherness to stave off its own dissolution.

The Tiger and the Whale

"Have I gone mad?" Piscine Patel—the eponymous "Pi" from Spanish Canadian writer Yann Martel's inventive 2001 novel *Life of Pi*—suddenly asks himself (109), just as he is about to help aboard his fledgling lifeboat a drowning Bengal tiger. Both boy and tiger have just survived a shipwreck that sets them alone and adrift in the Indian Ocean. His realization comes too late however, as the tiger finds his way aboard and Pi, by his own doing, is left alone in the boat with a wild animal.

The tiger, who vacillates for much of the novel between being menacingly present (as rendered in Ang Lee's film of the same name) and being enigmatically symbolic, bears a very human name: "Richard Parker". How he comes about this name is essential to what we might perilously call the novel's 'purpose', as well as

to interpreting the tiger as a narrative device. The origins of the name also evince the allegorical universe within which the novel exists, one that stubbornly resists scrutiny and demystification especially regarding the tiger's existence and symbolic function.

The novel begins in a framing device with Piscine, now an adult Canadian, reflecting on his childhood in south India in the 1970s and the events leading up to his quasi-religious experience with the tiger. He remembers himself as a precocious child, vexing his Hindu parents with an early onset of pluralistic spiritual curiosity; confronted by his parents together with a pandit, a priest and an imam about surreptitiously attending services in each religious tradition, he replies with a kind of pantheological, many-sided truth which foreshadows the later episode with the tiger and its many possible interpretations: "Bapu [Mahatma] Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God" (76).

Piscine's family is bewildered by this turn but not quite hostile to it. His father smooths over the episode with the three religious leaders with a more secular trinity of ice cream sandwiches (77). His mother hopes his unorthodox beliefs are a phase "like Mrs. [Indira] Gandhi" (84), but is nonetheless defeated by his logic ["If there's only one nation in the sky, shouldn't all passports be valid for it?" (81)] and humors the

boy even as far participating in his baptism (85). His brother Ravi is less sympathetic to this improvised unification of different symbolic and representative orders. "So, Swami Jesus, will you go on the hajj this year?" he chides, "Have you found time yet to get the end of your pecker cut off and become a Jew? At the rate you're going, if you go to temple on Thursday, mosque on Friday, synagogue on Saturday and church on Sunday, you only need to convert to three more religions to be on holiday for the rest of your life." (78)

Prior to leaving south India for Canada mainly due to Indira Gandhi's Emergency impositions, Piscine's parents own and operate a zoo in which Piscine learns many formative lessons and where he also first meets "Richard Parker" the tiger. Early in the story, Piscine's father warns him and his brother about the dangers of interacting with the wild animals incautiously, that is, of believing any of them to be tame or predictable (36-42). "I'm going to show you how dangerous tigers are" (37) he tells them, as they watch a different caged Bengal tiger devour a goat. What's vital about this lesson, the same one Piscine later learns from Richard Parker, is that the danger posed by an animal is not simply physical. What his father means to teach him is that anthropomorphization is not to be mistaken for understanding and, moreover, that the temptation to understand a wild animal is itself at the heart of dangers both physical and

epistemological:

Just beyond the ticket booth Father had had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain...Behind it was a mirror. But I learned at my expense that Father believed there was another animal even more dangerous than us, and one that was extremely common, too, found on every continent, in every habitat: the redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes. We've all met one, perhaps even owned one. It is an animal that is "cute", "friendly", "loving", "devoted", "merry", "understanding"...They are the pendants of those "vicious", "bloodthirsty", "depraved" animals...In both cases we look at an animal and see a mirror. The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists. I learned the lesson that an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us. (34)

The juxtaposition of these two lessons, that man is the most dangerous of all creatures save for the reflection of himself he sees in *other* animals, is the profundity at the center of Martel's book.

Anthropomorphism, as David Hume (and Thomas Hobbes before him) charged in his critique of theism, is not only a means to make an animal or other inanimate object less alien by conferring human properties onto it, it also allows us to similarly put a human face on the divine. What is most dreadful and incomprehensible in our experience of the universe, such as the indifference of nature, appears less so the more it resembles our appearance or behavior. Anthropomorphosis, as a desire to disclose the unknowable in an animal, is in this sense only an episode in the human proclivity to strain towards demystifying many equally incalculable mysteries. Hume's warning in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* seems prescient when considering the lesson Piscine's father teaches him—they are in fact, essentially the same counsel, only with God's infinite separateness from us in the place of the same absolute removal in an animal: "His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect, but incomprehensible. And this volume of nature contains a great and inexplicable riddle, more than any intelligible discourse or reasoning...by representing the Deity as so intelligible and comprehensible, and so similar to a human mind, we are guilty of the grossest and most narrow partiality, and make ourselves the model of the whole universe" (67).

What is both terrible and deific about an animal is that,

like a God, it belongs to an order or mode of reality which cannot be readily made identifiable by human cognition, i.e. empathically identified as another who is 'like us'.⁹⁵ As his efforts to understand Richard Parker later reveal to Piscine more explicitly, *Life of Pi* can credibly be read as a parable about reducing God—and therefore everything unfamiliar—to a single (and finite) order of meaning.

Martel has himself written about the connection between the animal and deific symbols he observed while travelling in India. In a short contribution to *The Guardian* in 2007, he writes about the trip he took to India in 1996 which inspired *Life of Pi*:

I noticed the animals first. Not just the obvious sacred cows of India, or the loudly cawing crows, or the tribes of monkey, or the other living animals that openly go about India's urban density. In Hindu temples, entered because they were both bustling and peaceful, I became aware of the many animals of Hinduism: Hanuman the monkey, Ganesha the elephant-headed, Nandi the bull, Garuda the eagle, and so on.

The gods followed. The many Hindu gods, of course. But

⁹⁵ Of course, this is by no means an obscure or secondary dimension of God as understood by most ancient and contemporary traditions. As Louis H. Feldman notes in his book *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, monotheism as understood in Jewish law and philosophy expressly influenced Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers towards an unrepresentable God (201-203), and the Greek poet Xenophanes criticized the Homeric tradition on these same terms in the 6th century B.C.E, when he wrote of the "one god [who] is the greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or in thought" (Fragment 23, pg. 31).

round the corner from where the Hindu gods lived there was always a church or a mosque or a temple of another faith, each with its share of gods. So many animals, so many gods - what were we in that multitude? ("Into the Void")

As Jentsch tells us, whether animal, god or a shadow against the wall, the assigning of human properties to what is frightening makes us feel safer. Giving a tiger a name bestows upon it a level of individual acquaintanceship and assuages some of the fear it incites. The story of Richard Parker's name further illustrates this point. We are told that, as a cub, the tiger who features in the story was captured along with its mother in the wild by a hunter-named Richard Parker—who named the cub "Thirsty" after it chose the water it was offered over food. A shipping clerk, however, errantly swapped the tiger's name with the man's on its official papers, and so the animal inherits the distinction of a proper name while the hunter, as the vanguard of actual and symbolic human violence, becomes the mononymous and aptly named Thirsty (147-148).

Naming is of course one of the first epistemological resources we have, not only as regards fear but our desire for intimacy as well, as the naming of a child (or a pet etc.) begins a *knowing* of it—essentially the journey from 'it' to 'he' or 'she'. But, as we have learned from Levinas and Trinh, the

power to explicate anticipates the power to dominate, in that what is other can only be reduced to our understanding through epistemic violence which begins with the associative properties of words. The danger inherent in such a method of divination is that (in addition to often being incorrect) it necessarily places at the determining center of the universe—knowable and unknowable—the reasoning human consciousness, for whom the desire to understand can never be separate from the desire for self-preservation. In a sense then, the process of familiarization always carries with it a great risk, the same one of which Piscine's father warned: that we will forget that the names we have given to things are not inherent to them and do not encapsulate them. In short, that we will mistake the word for the *world*.⁹⁶

After finally washing up on a beach in Mexico and surviving his ordeal, Piscine's experience at sea unsurprisingly undergoes trials of epistemic scrutiny that anticipate the readers' own questions. Pressed by skeptical interviewers from the "Japanese Ministry of Transport" annotating the sinking of the ship, Piscine presents two versions of the story of his time at sea,

⁹⁶ I borrow this lucid phrase from Garry Leonard and Deirdre Flynn, who observe: "The *word* can create a *world* that is not 'the world' at all, but a thought-enchanted effect of words: charming no doubt, but also ephemeral, ultimately arbitrary, and with no real ability to alter the world that continues behind the tapestry words can weave" (*Necessary Fictions* Chapter 2: "Nothing to be Done").

one with the tiger and one without (324-353). The latter accounts for some of the improbabilities of the former, but contains others of its own. "Doesn't that make life a story?" (335) he rhetorically asks the agents, "You can't prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it" (352). And when the interviewers agree that, plausibility aside, the story with the tiger is the better one, Martel makes the allegory of the divine explicit ("And so it goes with God").

Still, though the tiger behaves like an avatar of God and the symbolic territory of the sacred, it lends itself to various other semiotic uses both religious and secular, and its actual relationship to any one of them in the text remains relatively oblique.⁹⁷ What the tiger ultimately defies is the choosing of a "story" to the exclusion of all others. Through the advice of Piscine's father, placed early in the *bildungsroman*, Martel seems to be warning us off attempting any stable reading of Richard Parker. Piscine himself never achieves one; Richard Parker's true purpose, identity and fate, like the questions about truth and God which Piscine (as a child) does not believe have a singular answer, are not restrained by a single order of

⁹⁷ A particular feature of an animal as a representation of the unknown in literature, for instance, is that it traditionally doubles as an avatar (of the divine incarnate) or as a symbol of the secular/ material world (of the Fall). In a sense, we are in an animal confronted not only with a duality of spirit and flesh but the possibility of all one or all the other. Martel's novel here seems to clearly follow Melville, as I discuss later in this chapter.

'truth'. The tiger instead enacts diffuse, though occasionally intersecting, strains of meaning.⁹⁸ He oscillates between protector (166) (283), threat (155) (228) and subservient (183) (209), but Piscine's tenuous control over him—both temperamentally and ontologically—lasts only as long as the moment they find land and their companionship is ended. "Richard Parker" then becomes a tiger again, disappearing silently into the trees but not before denying Piscine (and the reader) any sense of acknowledgement, vindication or even an expression of defiance. The tiger's last act is to give no response at all, signalling only an animal indifference—to assert in other words itself as *tiger* and not "Richard Parker": "At the edge of the jungle, he stopped. I was certain he would turn my way. He would look at me. He would flatten his ears. He would growl. In some such way, he would conclude our relationship. He did nothing of the sort. He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life" (315-316).

Whether we read Martel's tiger as an unassociated signifier or as a meeting of the sacred and the secular, what emerges are other, harder choices: all aspects of a symbol or none, nothing

⁹⁸ Recall also Woolf's simultaneous fugal voices in *The Waves* I considered in chapter 2. Unlike Woolf's six narrators though, Martel's tiger essentially contains many 'voices' within itself.

or everything, many (all?) truths or no truth. In a *USA Today* interview given after the success of *Life of Pi's* film adaptation, Martel spoke directly to the similarity between the multifaceted nature of art and the many faces of the divine, in so far as they are each beyond our ability to make mean one distinct thing: "My background is very, very secular..." he explains, "Among the educated middle class, religion is sort of replaced by art. If you want to understand life, you don't pray to God, you consult with Mozart or Picasso or with Tolstoy or Voltaire." In a very conscious and deliberate way, *Life of Pi* thus points us back to the question of literary/artistic symbolism and the extent to which they "contain" or are catalysts for the meaning that we take away from them. As in nature, in trying to decipher what is concealed in art, do we not both assume the presence of inner, excavatable (and therefore finite) truths which are ours to take away? And yet, if these are merely illusory, a creation of our fever dreams, what is it then in a particular book, painting or piece of music that compels us? For literature, art, or language itself to possess a life independent from us, must not it contain secrets it jealousy withholds? Or, perhaps is there a third answer, some Solomonic compromise which is yet not simply arbitrary?

In the second chapter of his book *Plough, Sword and Book*

(1988) on the transition of agrarian societies into modern industrial ones, the social anthropologist Ernest Gellner explains that the 'evolution' in question from one to the other was not limited to changes in social and economic organization, values, mobility etc., but also included more fundamental shifts in how meaning is apprehended and then communicated in language. The bedrocks of post-Enlightenment societies, empiricism and rational discourse (i.e. language based on statements of fact), are intrinsically co-dependent in creating and sustaining what Gellner calls a "cross-related...single logical space" (61). He names this threshold—through which human societies pass to become 'modern'—"single-strandedness", by which societies become rationally "coherent" and "[r]eason enters history" (45). The moniker is appropriate (if somewhat reductive). It describes a basic orientation towards the world and its patterns, as complicated but ultimately discernible through the labor of human reasoning. Such a conviction understands "meaning" as underpinned by a cross-referenced, consistent and reliable network of truths, which can pass largely unadulterated through human cognition and into language. Gellner attributes much of the advancement of 'simple' societies into 'complex' ones to this very recent epistemic shift.⁹⁹

⁹⁹It is interesting and perhaps appropriate that contemporary art (from the Modernists onwards) has often cut the opposite way, questioning the monolithic role of rationalism within the project of 'modernity'—i.e. as

Gellner further explains that single-stranded societies are juxtaposed with and preceded by “multi-stranded” ones, in which the veracity of any linguistic expression—and therefore of the ‘truth’ it contains—relies not on its relationship to reproducible observations of a stable world but rather on social contexts and relationships. In such societies, what meaning a text, a feature of the landscape or other shared symbology has largely depends on what is culturally or religiously agreed upon, a framework thus quite apart from empirical observation. The ‘truth’ in the sense that traditional societies have understood it is thus better understood as free-standing, in the sense that it neither belongs to nor is validated by a universal network of meaning that adheres to empirical rational discrimination. This truth, we might venture to say, has *both* many faces and none, being untethered from a one-to-one relationship with any experience or object outside its context, i.e. with whatever may originate solely in the world.¹⁰⁰

Yet, though it seems indispensable to the legacy of industrialism and modernity in general, this change in orientation was not necessarily specifically intended. In his interpretation of Gellner’s theory as it applies to the work of

a belief that is not a belief, or perhaps a belief to *end* all beliefs.

¹⁰⁰ Whether experience without the intermediation of context to modify it is even conceivable, as Hegel, Derrida and others have argued it is not, is a separate though relevant and compelling question.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Neal Dolan calls the emergence of "single-stranded" thought "a cognitive-linguistic-by-product of the advance of natural science and the industrial-liberal division of labor" (223). Gellner holds that the incongruity of these worldviews is not only structural, it is also the result of pursuing different quarries, distinct ideas about 'knowledge' which lead to the application of very different perceptual tools. Gellner summarizes:

An instrumental and more or less quantified rationality presupposes a single measure of value, in terms of which alternative strategies can be assessed. When there is a multiplicity of incommensurate values, some imponderable, a man can only feel, and allow his feelings to be guided by the overall expectations or preconceptions of his culture. He cannot calculate. Single-mindedness and cold assessment of options, by contrast, when it does obtain, requires a rather special social setting, and one that is generally absent from simpler societies. (45)¹⁰¹

Dolan's study of Emersonian liberalism and its influence on contemporary art and culture also explores Emerson's call for

¹⁰¹ It is notable that Martel's *Piscine*, as a framing device for his recollections, tells the reader that after reaching Canada he completed a double major in religious studies and zoology (3). "Sometimes I got my majors mixed up" (5) he admits, as if in his adult life he is still trying to reconcile two different worldviews, two "stories" to understand his childhood, the symbolic and the analytical.

robust and systematic meaning systems in the post-industrial era. What is arguably unique about what we loosely refer to as 'modernity' is that its logical coherence rests in large part on the claim that it *no longer needs to rest on such a framework*. Emerson, as Dolan expounds—particularly in the former's "Representative Men" lectures—was deeply concerned about that particular development, the absence of a symbolic systematization within modernity's ethos. Symbols and icons, whether sacred or secular, were for Emerson essential for providing the masses a semblance of meaning in the new secular zeitgeist of the nineteenth century. A symbology, grounded in nature and the transcendent, were to his mind essential to a society's spiritual and moral health. As Dolan illustrates, Emerson believed that without such a system, we are left to contend with our doubts that the "world is intelligibly ordered and thus not impossible to navigate and survive in" (226).

The work of creating and promulgating a stable iconographic order, Emerson believed, was as essential for the secular age (single-stranded civilizations) as for earlier eras. In their most elementary forms, after all, 'rational deduction' and 'socioculturally derived meaning' are not entirely different (i.e. as ways of meaning making). Each must begin, inarguably, by interpreting experience, so that it does not remain in a state of total disorder. Each subsequently constructs a meaning

system governed by its own rules, which is therefore self-referential. And each is engaged, as Dolan writes of the work of the men Emerson chose for his titular "representative men", in "transmuting the potentially infinite and thus overwhelming raw data of experience" (231). The difference, where there is one, perhaps lies then in the extent to which any approach is self-reflexive, i.e. whether it considers itself to *be* an ontology and one amongst many such. If all we have is a choice of symbols, in other words, sorting through them is perhaps possible only to the extent of determining which symbolical architectures call attention to themselves. Roughly speaking, a "single-stranded" orientation, rather by definition, presupposes itself as transparent, a way to look not a symbol that represents an object in the world, *but rather at the object world itself*. It is a symbolic order whose founding ideology is that it is post-symbolic.

These varying approaches to truth have interesting permutations as far as literary symbolism and metaphor are concerned, on at least two distinct levels, (i) the relationship of symbols *embedded* in the text to truth in the context of that text, i.e. to the 'object' for which they stand in, and (ii) the readers' ability to take away meaning from these symbols, either by teasing it out from the text or attributing one to them. Emerson placed great faith and value in literature, as a pure

contemplation of nature, to not only perceive and convey truth but even to restore meaning to modern life, to undo the latter's many distortions. In essays like 1844's "The Poet", he seems to describe literature in near sacred terms, capable of peering through or transcending the suffering caused by human misapprehension of God and nature. "[T]he evils of the world are such only to the evil eye." he writes, "For as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who reattaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts" (455).

Here going beyond even "transmuting...the raw data of experience" into a meaningful symbolic meta-structure, Emerson's trust in the poet's contemplation, rooted in the indefatigably self-reliant subject, went as far as *rediscovering* the true nature of things, making them speak their truth and thereby revealing "evil" as rooted in misconception. He explicitly lays out this exalted purpose in the same essay, writing:

the poet is he who can articulate [the world]...The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives [symbols] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object...This is true science. The poet alone knows

astronomy, chemistry, vegetation, and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs. He knows...why the great deep is adorned with animals, with men, and gods... (456)

What is unsaid in these passages, perhaps being too obvious a supposition to declare, is that for poetry (and so literature) to have this power of divination, the truth it reveals and restores us to must somehow be within the bounds of human perception, visible in its nakedness—*single-stranded*. Colloquially speaking, we must be able to 'know it when we see it' if indeed we really commit to looking (as does a poet).

This foundational confidence of Emerson's Transcendentalism was undoubtedly grounded in his theological orientation and background as a pastor, but I argue it also underwrites a significant strain of our thinking on how to approach art. For is not art, approached as an extrasensory perception that can "articulate" the deepest truth, then posited as the sharpest of our empirical tools, making knowable what is otherwise radically other? What relationship would art so conceived have to what is *inarticulable* (sublime), to multi-stranded meaning which purports to be beyond empiricism, as in the nature of God? Or is this actually what Emerson means by "truth"?

The exaltation of poetry is consistent with Emerson's wider project of recovering the sacred in modern life through

introspection and self-discovery. These ideas were for his contemporaries and successors deeply influential, even those that did not always agree. Herman Melville, who once after hearing Emerson speak paid him a high compliment in one of his letters ["I love all men who dive. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more" ("To Evert" 121)] nonetheless deeply disagreed with Emerson on the grounds of truth, evil and the sacred in art. In his letters, Melville admits to forming at first a rather low opinion of Emerson without having read much of him, but later discovering a new respect for him after having done so. Still, as William Braswell researched for *American Literature* in 1937, though Melville was often struck by Emerson's sincerity and integrity, he found much to criticize in what he read of the latter's essays. Beside the last line of the aforementioned passage in "The Poet", for instance ("He knows..."), Melville wrote in the margins of his personal copy of the essays, "Would some poet be pleased to tell us 'why.' [then]...Will Mr.E.?"¹⁰²

This discord, in my estimation, is a useful way to think about the symbolic in literature, as it reiterates approximately the same dispute we encounter in Martel, namely: what is the

¹⁰² Like Emerson, Melville's position was probably informed by his own life, famously tumultuous as it was. As Braswell explains, the "unhappy result of Melville's search for some purpose in the universe explains...[why] he did not share Emerson's enthusiasm over the poet's ability to reconcile man to the deepest mysteries" (324).

relationship of symbols to truth, and relatedly, does reaching for that truth through *art* bring us closer to truth submerged (the sacred, sublime, the *other* etc.) or push it further away? *Life of Pi's* spiritual ancestor, Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) was in many ways the most profound and direct text to ask these questions. Though a deep dive into that text's multitudes is far beyond the scope of my discussion here, I do specifically want to consider the whale in the context of Melville's disagreements with Emerson.

There is nothing approaching a critical rubric to understand the whale as a symbol. Its confounding effect on the imagination of most readers can (and has) been read as alternatively nihilistic or epiphanic. Far from Emerson's vision of the oracular poet, Melville's text, as innumerable critics have observed, is permeated, even ruled by doubt; its 'spiritual' territory is the space that lies between revelation and despair. This is partially attributable to the ambivalence of the quest itself, being at once a search for the divine and a *hunt* for it. Ahab is at once a zealot and a profaner, as Daniel G. Hoffman has noted, a Faustian figure rebelling against God all the while on a quest to find Him and to slay evil on his behalf (206-207).

Melville's careful delineation of the whale's pantheological nature, partially a function of the author's nineteenth century secular sensibilities, nonetheless exists alongside his overt

references to the Book of Jonah. Though it casts significant doubt on the accessibility of truth, *Moby Dick*—as an allegory—seems to provisionally fulfill Emerson’s desire for a secular-literary reinvestment in symbols of the divine, i.e. the sacred within the structure of the secular. In this sense, the book on its surface sits comfortably in the tradition of nineteenth century American popular scholarship, which, as Dolan points out, was deeply invested in the same synthesis of the sacred and the secular of which Emerson was a vocal proponent.¹⁰³ In providing an oracular symbol, Melville seems ostensibly to take up Emerson’s project. Yvonne Sherwood writes “*Moby Dick*...may ‘hear’ the book of Jonah from the perspective of the-man-(Ishmael)-in-the-pew, but it’s a sign of the times...the-man-in-the-pew is now an (a)gnostic, prone to subversive readings of biblical literature. In *Moby Dick*, the God of Jonah mixes, as he could never have done before, with Egyptian and Hindu deities and the gods of Greek mythology to become the ‘universal thump’ (*Moby Dick* 28)” (191-192). Melville’s Ishmael is dogged in his descriptions of the whale, laboring to rise to Emerson’s challenge to see what is hidden in nature. The whale (unlike

¹⁰³ The renowned “lyceum movement” of public debates, performances and lectures by public intellectuals in nineteenth century America doubled as a means of public education and—in a formal sense—a secular oracular tradition. Emerson was deeply enamored by its possibilities for a public discourse that included all the many strains of intellectual and spiritual contemplation, wherein a lecturer could give all of himself to an audience that was left changed by what Dolan incisively calls “linguistic transubstantiation” (229).

Martel's tiger) is made by Melville's exhaustive descriptions more flesh than apparition.

Yet the whale as *symbol* is both laden with meaning and meaningless, i.e. a vessel for both the presence and absence of the sacred. Even as he attempts to truly see the whale, to make it 'speak', Ishmael repeatedly runs up against the impossibility of this task. He decides first that the whale conceals its face, and then that it has no face at all. Like Piscine haunted by Richard Parker's unreadable body language on the edge of the trees, Ishmael writes of the whale: "in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant. Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen...hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face" (366). Elsewhere he elevates and even exalts the whale's same lack of distinct facial features and utter lack of speech ("Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidical silence") (338). The change of heart, between veneration and condemnation, of course ultimately anticipates Ahab's death at the hands of the god he

ventures too far to see, the disinterred symbol that, when it speaks at last, utters only the word *death*.

Both tiger and whale are thus, to my mind, ultimately united as the residue of the sacred rather than the sacred itself, not the face of God as much as God's face *turned away*. Ishmael hints at a divine indifference in chapter 41, as if he has ultimately deemed the allegorical power of the Book of Jonah on the whale to be wanting. He looks upon Ahab and, instead of a prophet, he sees now the "ungodly old man, chasing with curses a *Job's whale* round the world" [*italics mine*] (188). The crucial shift (though unassuming, occurring in the text proper only once until the epilogue) from Jonah's whale to Job's Leviathan¹⁰⁴, recasts not only Ahab but the whale as well. The symbolic whale twists and contorts, hiding and then changing its face, and each time the meaning it quickens escapes along with it.

Hoffman reads Ahab's condition as essentially human, defined by the space between these two creatures, the two whales: the whale as a Revelation of God's purpose and the Leviathan as the withholding of it. Jonah's whale implies the voice of the God who spoke, while Job's Leviathan is a primeval (and originally

¹⁰⁴ See Job 40:41, which describes a creature Leviathan beyond human understanding and control. Of the finitude of human knowledge God asks Job at the end of his many torments: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a fish-hook? (40:25) and "Who can uncover the face of his garment? Who shall come within his double bridle? Who can open the doors of his face?" (41:5-6). As if speaking to Ahab himself, these are asked of Job to remind him of all that lies beyond his ability and rights to know, i.e. to warn him off the sort of quest Ahab

pagan) creature of an earlier, more terrifying view of the cosmos. Ishmael's specific invocation of Job turns Ahab's quest inside out, from search to hunt. But the lesson of Job is that God cannot be hunted, and it is this same lesson Ahab refuses to learn: to restrain in himself the desire to make the whale speak, to demand the tiger turn around, to make God explain himself.

Moby Dick is thus not just concerned with what is radically other about an animal, but also about the limits of what nature and its symbols can teach us about God. Melville's view of the natural world, unlike Emerson's, seems to be that nature and therefore natural symbolism cannot be taken for truth—they are the works of God, both good and evil, but provide few if any hints about His purpose. Lawrence Buell similarly asks: "shall we say that Melville works with a different yet equally legitimate conception from Emerson of what it means to acquaint men at first hand with the Deity?...What Melville sought to acquaint men with was a different yet equally salient attribute of the divine: the Deity as mystery, the experience of Job" (68). Like Richard Parker, Melville's whale is truth submerged, a creature of God and not God, an *instrument* of the divine

undertakes to learn the nature and workings of God. The line is explicitly and severely drawn in 38:11: "And [God] said: 'Thus far shalt thou come, but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed'."

rather the divine itself.¹⁰⁵ In deifying the whale, Ahab effectively mistakes a symbol for a truth (the signifier for the signified). I am inclined to agree with Hoffman when he summarizes the novel's great insight into human exasperation standing before the gates of divine knowledge or, just the same, in reading the symbolic:

Ahab mistook God's power for God's essence...All of Ishmael's explorations of the attempts made in art, science, folklore and myth, to define the whale are a contradictory labyrinth of suppositions which only his own experience can verify. And that experience proves the white whale unknowable to the last. If, then, we cannot know God's greatest handiwork, how can we know the God that made him? On this reef many an interpreter of Moby-Dick has foundered...Moby-Dick is no more the God of *Moby-Dick* than Leviathan is the God of the Book of Job...Melville's God lies beyond even the Gospel truths.

(217)

Again, we are left doublevisioned about the symbol and the sacred; reading Melville it is as if the former can only point at the latter when it is no longer there. The space between

¹⁰⁵ Emerson seems to agree, after a fashion, when he writes: "Things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part. Every line we can draw in the sand, has expression; and there is no body without its spirit or genius" (452). The difference with Moby Dick of course, is that it never becomes possible to determine what the "expression" is.

Emerson and Melville appears as vast as the "howling infinite" (117) of Melville's ocean, Emerson's inspired poet seeing clearly through the veil while the *Pequod* founders in an ocean which is "shoreless, indefinite as God."

Melville may have reconsidered his view of Emersonianism as "oracular gibberish" once he had acquainted himself with Emerson's writings, but their disagreement takes place on no less hallowed a territory than 'what is truth, how do we find it and how do we then describe it to others, i.e. with what signs?' This problem is explicitly considered within *Moby Dick*, but where Emerson saw the profound untapped potential of human contemplation and introspection, Melville seems to find only the limits of these. The self-reliant (and determining) subject at the heart of meaning making, *Moby Dick* implies, is still all alone with that meaning, a creature of his own imagination with no lasting recourse to any truth outside of it.

Symbols are meaningful to the extent that we tacitly (even unconsciously) acquiesce to their encroachment, to allow them a second life within us. In other words, they don't simply 'mean what they mean'. The meaning of a particular symbol is like an incomplete sentence we must finish. Each symbol lives myriad lives, profound or cheap, obvious or obscure, meaningful and meaningless, without materially changing of itself. Naturally,

symbolic meaning is informed to a great extent by the context in which it is experienced and by our changeability as an audience, our sociocultural background, our mood, what other symbols we have consumed etc. Whether one takes the Emersonian view of the subject who discloses the secrets within the symbolic or the Melvillean, of one who is defeated by them, meaning and *meaning making* are necessarily mediated by consciousness and then by reflection, as a great novel is recognized as great only retroactively, once contextualized with its peers (and perhaps if enough readers consider it so). What is imperative to realize is that we often do not *experience* meaning in this sense, as a series of subjective associations and choices. We are 'moved' by art, 'struck' by a great painting, overwhelmed by a great piece of music. We feel viscerally exposed by a great literary insight or metaphor. Art seems alive in this sense, scheming to catch us unawares, invade us when our guard is down, and the symbolic in art seems thus to exist independent of us, not on its surface (as artifice) but *inside*, in the strange, deep waters of Job's Leviathan.

Yet art is made of stuff, word, watercolor, the drawing of bow across string. Speaking matter-of-factly, it emerges not out of the ocean or a dream but from under the editor's knife or photographer's darkroom. In some sense then the deep symbolic territory of art must still have a surface; Melville's whale may

turn its face from Ahab and Ishmael, but the reader of *Moby Dick* still has before them the *text* as face. We are implicated in the event, in making or trying to make the text speak, in much the same way as Ahab is with the whale. As readers, we must decide how much attention we pay to the underworld of symbolic meaning within vs the sleight of hand on the surface, i.e. whether we focus or unfocus our eyes. Richard Lanham has called this a matter of noticing a "style", which we either look at or *through*, i.e. at the surface or through it at the deep. Both possibilities exist at once, of course, and can closely follow each other. We can focus or unfocus—in a manner of speaking, hear the music of the orchestra or the creaking of the players' chairs etc. Emerson's oracular poet, who "traverses the whole scale of experience" (448) for meaningful moments asks us to look *through* the refraction and see the source. His art is a keyhole into truth, an opening into the universe. Each symbol is a portal directed aslant at the same unifying truth, as the full truth of nature is expressed in each of its signs. As Emerson puts it "there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature" (454).

Melville meanwhile tells us, quite unambiguously, *that way madness lies*. Having exhausted every available resource to make the symbol speak we are left with only the symbol itself, like Ahab, looking at a surface through which we cannot see. Which

one does art, in portraying nature and otherness, ask of us? To try to understand or to forswear understanding? The world revealed or the world that is beyond revelation? Or are these choices again only choices in retrospect, after the moment has already been lived?

The answer, unsurprisingly, is always incomplete (recalling Hegel), since it refers to a process that is always ongoing. “‘Clarity’,” Lanham explains, “can only indicate a reader’s decision, for whatever reasons, to look *through* a style rather than *at* it, to concentrate on content and ignore style. And my reasons for doing this may not coincide with yours. My opacity may be your transparency. The whole apparatus depends entirely on a previous assumption of shared norms” (189). The key word here is “apparatus”, which emphasizes neither *subject* nor *text* but the *moment* in which one encounters the symbolic. The experience of art (and artistic insight), in a sense, is a simultaneous act of looking at and looking through. It lies neither in a stable work nor in a stable subject but in the *approach*, which destabilizes both. It is in interacting with *at/through* that we allow ourselves an experience of the full spectrum, the canvas and the painting, or the music and the noise.

The binary idea of meaning as lying either in the symbol/work or in the determining subject is thus inherently flawed as

point of departure, an "Aristotelian scheme" as Lanham calls it, which "introduced a fundamental distortion into Western thought...[which] radically confused the relationship between reader, text and reality" (213). The scheme alleged here is single-strandedness, the "self-standing idea and the transparent verbal surface." Lanham's point gets at the heart of the difficulty the symbols pose, the way they wrong-foot us by being both a thing that stands in for something else and a thing in and of itself. To read a text either as a surface or to look through it at its 'meaning' is thus a false choice, in that it does not reflect (or even entirely ignores) the actual act of looking, making "the continuing oscillation between At and Through vision seem to be an either/or choice only, slicing the full wave-form in half...[and] a dynamic interchange seem a static tableau."

I briefly discussed Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* in chapter two with regard to language and signification. As it takes up the key concern, through Lily Briscoe, of what Lanham calls an "interchange", I want to return to it for a moment here. Like Piscine and Ahab, Lily Briscoe must contend with an ostensibly opaque symbol, the lighthouse, whose 'essence'—or lack thereof—and how it responds to depiction seems to shift with each appearance and viewpoint. Though it lives, unlike Moby Dick, above the waves and in full view, we are never told what

the lighthouse means. Each character seems to perceive it slightly differently, and every trick of light seems to change its face, bring it closer or further away (211; 246). It responds unpredictably to memory; in part three James Ramsay, (the youngest of the eight Ramsay children), looking upon it across the water, reflects on it being very different in his recollection than the sight that now lies before him: "The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now...[h]e could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?" (251).

He comes then to a great realization, one which might perhaps have saved Ahab from his fate: "No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too." Towards the end of the novel Lily Briscoe arrives, as if on the reader's behalf, at a similar understanding, that looking *through* a symbol is impossible without first (and also) looking *at* it, and thus the looking itself implicates us in interchange. She settles ultimately for painting a "vision" (281) of the lighthouse, i.e. a record of the encounter with the symbolic rather than the symbol explained. "It would be hung in the attics" she reflects, "it

would be destroyed. But what did that matter?" The lighthouse, once painted, is thus neither Emerson's higher truth evinced nor Melville's truth turned away; what distinguishes Lily Briscoe from Ahab is her recognition that the symbol is always many-faced, a wave-form, and becomes particle only (and as long as) we engage it. This is the meaning of Lily Briscoe's "vision", and I contend is also the redemptive moment in our relationship with art, when we are both enlivened by our experience and by the knowledge of that experience being ephemeral and forever limited by our perspective.

By itself, the suggestion that we as readers (or listeners, viewers etc.) participate in making symbols meaningful is not especially controversial. What is more sobering is the possibility that, if meaning is manifested not 'in' art (as an object) nor in us, the evaluating subject, but in the way we experience objects in the world, then in what sense do symbols mean anything in and of themselves? And, moreover, what then materially distinguishes one symbol from another (besides prior acculturation/ expectation), 'good' art from 'bad', or even art itself *from any other phenomena*? The concluding pages of this chapter and dissertation are devoted to thinking through this complex question, and to considering how it informs and overlaps with my discussions about otherness in earlier chapters.

The American philosopher Monroe Beardsley, in his noteworthy work on art and aesthetics, once posed the above question (simplified: 'what is art') in similar terms, i.e. what distinguishes art ("aesthetic objects"¹⁰⁶) from anything else in the world. In the 1980 postscript to the second edition of his 1958 book *Aesthetics, Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Beardsley settles on a definition of art that attempts to bring together the phenomenal and the ideal: "an artwork is an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character...in the fashioning of which the intention to enable it to satisfy the aesthetic interest played a significant causal part" (xix). There are intriguing co-dependencies here; the use of "intended" and "causal" indicates that art is not simply that which produces an aesthetic feeling or response, but that which does so (to a "significant" degree) *on purpose*. Though Beardsley leaves room for the aesthetically evocative as a secondary purpose (such as, for instance, a building that is both functional and beautiful, or a sacred artifact), he delimits art broadly to the "intentionally produced". This of course has the effect of eliminating both everyday and naturally occurring phenomena,

¹⁰⁶ Beardsley includes in the category of aesthetic works not only tangible objects but also performances, what he calls "phenomenal" objects or "presentations" of aesthetic objects, such as a particular rendering of a song or play (44).

which can induce profound aesthetic feeling but cannot be said to have been expressly created for such a purpose, be it primary or secondary.

While preserving the indispensability of the "presentation" of an artwork, Beardsley's definition also excludes an experience of the immaterial (is a rollercoaster, as an object, aesthetically evocative? Is it meant to be?) It also places upon us the burden of defining "aesthetic object" in a reasonably stable, limited way, since Beardsley specifically states that an "aesthetic object is not identical with any particular presentation [experience] of it" (44).

What is intriguing, for the purposes of my analysis, about this schema is not that that it attempts to create more stringent criteria for art than others have done, or even whether that criteria is coherent or appropriate. Instead, I chose to highlight Beardsley's delimitation because—perhaps unavoidably for any attempt to do thuswise—it seems to infer a life of the "aesthetic object" independent of experience, i.e. that art is art even when we are not experiencing it. For an aesthetic object to be distinguished from any other on the basis of artistic *intent* (rather than, or in addition to, on each individual experience of it), invariably draws us into a discussion about essence, great art vs mediocre art etc. For if we must know an artwork's past and purpose to understand how it

makes us feel, what do we do when such information is unavailable? Or, more significantly, when we have an “aesthetic experience” under other circumstances, brought on by something we do not recognize as art? We can separate classes of objects, but how do we distinguish between qualities of feeling? ¹⁰⁷

Or perhaps, should describing instead the nature of the *feeling*, the aesthetic response to art take precedence over scrutinizing the artwork and so form the basis of our answer to ‘what is art’? Such a focus would not be concerned with—and would in fact forego entirely—evaluating the aesthetic object in terms of what it *is* outside the experience of it (and thus would not run afoul of Beardsley and Wimsatt’s “affective fallacy”). Rather than submit a new definition for art (virtually any attempt at which tends to lead us away from, or lead a parasitic existence on, the “raw data” of experience) I wish instead to propose a shift in posture. Namely, that we begin any conversation about art from the position of art as *other*, and

¹⁰⁷ Beardsley himself, in a 1946 paper co-authored with William Wimsatt Jr., described an “intentional fallacy” when reading poetry, which ensues from trying to bring an artist’s intentions to bear on his/her work. The authors conclude that “[c]ritical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle” (487). They also however, imply that artistic intent can manifest within the work if it “succeeds”, in which case the “poem itself shows what [the artist] was trying to do” (469). Considering an artwork is not so different then, Beardsley and Wimsatt claim, from “judging a pudding”, the inference being the existence of certain free-standing qualities to an artwork which can be ascertained as a matter of judgment. This suggestion anticipated a 1949 essay by the same authors in which they detail an “affective fallacy”, which (as the name suggests) confuses a work for the feeling it produces—“what it *is* and what it *does*” (31). “The outcome of either Fallacy,” they summarize, “the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear”, thus suggesting again the existence of an artwork in between its creation and consideration, *in which it is still art*.

with the same suspension of any other prejudgement as in the approach to otherness.

As I have discussed in earlier chapters exploring Levinas and Trinh, the other is distinguished from any ordinary object we experience by the very aspect of being beyond one's ability to use to satisfy one's desire to understand or otherwise possess (and therefore subsume). An 'artistic moment' then, in my estimation, would be a purely phenomenal experience of being similarly visited, i.e. by something *in experience* that does not respond to delimiting or comply with stable contextualization vis-à-vis other objects or aspects of our experience.

William Desmond, in his reading of Kant's sublime, describes a "disturbance" that "great art" visits upon us which undermines the "radical autonomy" of the Kantian self (56-57). That is to say, our self-confidence (as transcendental *subject*) in being the determining center of everything we experience (see chapter 3), which also thus allows us to assume the position of *original* from which otherness is then mediated, is undermined, even confounded by art as *other-being*. We feel the *middle* suddenly shaking, becoming uncertain, by encountering something not only unassimilable but which originates in radical otherness. Though Desmond also privileges good art over bad, what's compelling here is the idea that art's intervention is in destabilizing rather than in 'succeeding' aesthetically (or at least that the

latter imbues art with the power to realize the former). Further, if this de-centering is what we take to be the 'artistic moment', then to my mind we dramatically compromise any definition of art (or exclusion thereof) that tries to go beyond experience, since we can only be thusly affected by art *in the encountering of it*.

Attributing to any individual artwork or class of art that it inherently—when we are not looking—has such an effect would by definition *null that affect*, i.e. to claim that we have understood and therefore assimilated it. In this sense, quite perversely, declaring that a work of art is 'great' consumes its strangeness; by attributing to it qualities not typically found elsewhere, we are also saying that those qualities and their presence are within our ability to adjudge, by which we thereby reassert our position as the center.¹⁰⁸ No, an "artistic moment" that truly intrudes is one which, like the other, begins and must in some sense remain one from which we are completely alienated. And, again like the other, this alienation from art as *other-being* is felt on the most immanent level—like Victor Frankenstein before the monster—within the epistemology of self. We "seem haunted", Desmond writes of this feeling, "by an

¹⁰⁸ Levinas makes a similar point in *Totality and Infinity* about otherness when he writes, "if the same would establish its identity by simple opposition to the other, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other" (38).

elusive, often overwhelming power of origination that does not seem to belong to us univocally. In the very heart of self-determination a *strange immanent otherness* seems to arise again and again...[which] disturbs our being at one with ourselves." To be visited by an artistic moment, in a sense, is to momentarily lose not only a claim to the center, but one's identification with the self at the center.¹⁰⁹

The effect of this visitation ultimately, to the extent that one can say anything meaningful about it as a definition that *always* holds, is that brings us out of our everyday, unconscious mastery of the world around us and back to an awareness (of objects, otherness, our bodies etc.), and to a sense of our own inadequacy to comprehend what we encounter. As far as a traditional medium like literature is concerned, art so defined would rely neither on understanding authorial intent nor on considering the meaning of the text independent of it. We would instead read literature to *interrupt* our otherwise utilitarian, object oriented desire to integrate objects into a stable frame (which we can manage and refine). A world consisting solely of what we have fully assimilated places no demands on our

¹⁰⁹ Gayatri Spivak, critiquing from a postcolonial standpoint Hegel's framework of art as a pathway on the spirit's journey to self-knowledge (in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*), describes art again as the terrain of non-knowing, which reveals the gaps in the "situation of the spirit" (referring to Hegel's untranslatable *Geist*). Art is the disruption that is paradoxically a measure of how far the spirit is from self-knowledge; as Spivak puts it, "'Art' is the name or the sign of the lack of fit between the two axes of the graph-spirit and its knowing" (40).

awareness to acknowledge it—we scarcely ‘experience’, in a formal sense, that world at all. The Russian formalist art critic Viktor Shklovsky called this process within experience an “algebrization”, the “over-automatization of an object [which] permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort...so [that] life is reckoned as nothing” (9). Objects once habitualized within perception grow indistinct, and their relationships to us become so familiar as to be nearly invisible. In amongst what is known and habitual, we spend most of our time in unconscious arrogation and accumulation.

This conceptualization figures art as beginning with that which is particularly ‘inefficient’ and uneconomical to recognize (and thus look past).¹¹⁰ It is also comparable to role the other plays within consciousness, i.e. confronting being by evading appropriation as another object. As the other pre-empts ontology with metaphysics, art forestalls automatized familiarity with defamiliarized perception. It should be noted that it is not that art or its content *must* substantively be something which is heretofore unknown to us or even be apart from the nondescript or commonplace; art can also make the familiar seem strange, to make us look at it curiously again so that, as Shklovsky evocatively writes, “art exists that one may

¹¹⁰ Inefficiency is critical to Shklovsky’s ideation; a work of art introduces a temporal lag in the habituated movement of perception, a “slowness” (12), which “increase[s] the difficulty and length of perception” (9).

recover the sensation of life...to make the stone stony." An experience of art is to be repelled, jarred back into awareness.

What is art is therefore not necessarily *always so*; what challenges us as outside the limits of our understanding on one occasion may not do so on the next, and might over time become so normalized as to cease to do so entirely. This again does not make any claims on what is objectively a work of art or not, only what is experienced as one—that is, I am suggesting not that a particular play or performance is *art* one night and *not art* the next, but rather that we may experience it on one occasion as art and as familiar the next, and that is all that we may finally say about it. The artistic moment is singular and unrepeatable precisely because it is not a causal result of or replacement for what instigated it. It exists in the “meanwhile”, and is unrecoverable afterwards. To return to Melville and Emerson for a moment, such an approach would find its inspiration in the symbolic not in terms of the obscure against the oracular, but rather in the anxieties and exhilarations we feel as readers in the strangeness of the symbolic which lies beyond our ability to make speak or stay silent. Put differently, this moment is tethered neither to the keyhole (to use my earlier metaphor) nor to what lies past it, but rather to the act of looking through. As Lily Briscoe might say, neither to the lighthouse nor whatever lies beyond it, only

to the vision.

Along with these possibilities, it must be acknowledged that this conception has significant potential pitfalls. Most notably, it takes a radically broad view of 'art', so as to make the category seem rather superfluous, even empty. In doing so it flirts with veritable chaos, removing all controls on the category and absorbing innumerable equally valid test cases. By moving far beyond art as either aesthetic object or as performance, it opens up the natural, the everyday/unremarkable and the accidental/incidental as all potentially capable of being artistically valuable. More ominously for art criticism perhaps, it virtually discards any conversation about essence, dispensing with any meaningful distinction between good art and bad, except in the very loosest of terms, i.e. that some artworks *may* bring together elements that tend to be more provocative to the average person (based on their preparedness, cultural norms, prior expectations etc.).

These questions are consequential, even intimidating; art theorist Arthur C. Danto was prompted to declare the post-Warholian age "the end of art" for similar reasons. Echoing Hegel's declaration in his *Aesthetics*¹¹¹ for somewhat different

¹¹¹ Hegel's famous thesis, crudely summarized, was that romantic and post-romantic art heralded the end of art as far as being the highest way (compared to religion or philosophy) to point to something above and

(but not unrelated) reasons, Danto described the condition of modern art as having no way forward after Warhol except radical pluralism (i.e. almost anything can be art). Danto reasoned that if Warhol's famous *Brillo* box replications and Marcel Duchamp's urinal could legitimately be art, then art has reached the end of its quest to "understand itself philosophically" (134) and "there is no mark through which works of art can be perceptually different from the most ordinary of objects" (139). Danto does not claim that this end represents a death, but the possibility seems there. To so radically open ourselves to art as that which is other in experience threatens to render the category itself defunct; if everything can be art, in a sense, then is *anything*?

Yet the central premise here again is at a distance from experience. Warhol's replications are problematic mostly because one cannot distinguish them from the objects they ostensibly represent—from *actual Brillo* boxes. As I have noted, a foregrounding of experience over an essentialist inquiry into the properties of the object averts this discussion; an experience of disruption, a "slowness" in Shklovsky's terms, is *equally* possible with a *Brillo* box or with its replica. If we relentlessly focus on experience, art is quite literally

beyond itself (such as God). Danto, referencing this 'end', explains that Hegel believed post-Romantic art "had become an object rather than a medium through which a higher reality made itself present" (130). Compared to classical art, the Romantics chose increasingly secular subjects—art which self-consciously focused on itself as subject, i.e. on its own interiority.

pluralized past any breaking point, since the 'artistic moment' can never lead us back to its own inception in any material way. Art is therefore, I contend, only a name for a visitation, an experiencing of oneself as displaced from the center of one's own perception in a way which cannot be afterwards recreated. A 'great' (or 'powerful' etc.) work of art would be so defined by what it induces in us that we are not masters of, that we cannot control. Whether this is the intent (or more accurately, the aesthetic purpose) of the artwork for which it has been intricately arranged or is by us completely imagined is not only impossible to say, as Beardsley argues, it is also insubstantial, as we cannot with any confidence anticipate such a feeling—even with a work we know intimately. To do so would be to accommodate ourselves to it, to make it familiar, an automatized object of aesthetic pleasure. Art exists on the edge of the familiar and confronts us with the unknown that lies beyond it. When we lose perspective of this edge we feel the world buckle, as the strange and unfamiliar—the other—make themselves acquainted within the known of *self*.

To encounter art and to be moved by it then is to be made momentarily a stranger in one's home. The contemporary Canadian philosopher John Russon has recently described the most basic nature of experience as "a kind of exposure, a contact with an outside" (3). The outside begins and constitutes all that is

beyond what we perceive as our selves, and we live therefore always at the "point of contact between one and another, between "I am I" and "there it is" (61). This description is particularly insightful, I feel, because it invokes not only the idea of a threshold (whereupon we mediate the familiar and the unfamiliar) but also the vulnerability we feel there, at being, in the most literal sense, *exposed*. The *I* is the coordinates from which we look upon the world outside *and* the being that is exposed by it. It follows then that the feeling of being exposed is the very realization of an irreducible otherness at the edge, an outside that lies at the doorstep of what Russon calls *home*¹¹², "simultaneously a place of refuge and a site of exposure."

In the final measure, I contend, art is the *most* acute experience of being entangled with that which exposes. We may be culturally acclimated to particular forms, mediums, styles etc., which may insulate us from acknowledging or elevating others. We may make prejudgements about what we expect to be great, and that may influence us. We may recognize certain forms as artistic and disregard others. We may construct and enact extremely intricate and internally consistent metrics of what

¹¹² Similar to Shklovsky's "algebrization" Russon explains that what defines home is by definition its familiarity, both to us and of us. It is "deferential to me and I to it" (65). What lies beyond home is marked in contrast by its "indifference", a "nondeferential space". In other words, that it does not depart from or answer us.

constitutes a great novel, a beautiful piece of music, a masterful painting, a provocative poem. In short, we may have innumerable predilections and expectations for what is 'good' art, what is art and when we are experiencing art. But none of these prepare us for the moment of being exposed, which is an involuntary feeling and which is what makes our relationship to art a twin to otherness. That which arrives at our doorstep as alien and demands entry into *home* does not call ahead, and afterwards leaves just as quickly. And this is perhaps all that we can say to hold art up as substantively separate from any other aspect of experience. We may not in any meaningful way be able to distinguish art from any another phenomena that has a similarly defamiliarizing effect to wake us up to the world. But we can distinguish the 'artistic moment' from the ordinary, in the same way we can recognize the other as unlike the mundane objects we encounter. And perhaps that is enough.

The American literary scholar Giles Gunn once described the limitations in the collective "imagination" of otherness throughout American history as a "national Emersonian inclination to either withdraw back into the private sanctity of the self or to relinquish that sanctity in favor of fusing with the All" (178). Gunn alleges that owing perhaps to the legacy of the early Puritans and then to westward expansion against a

perpetual physical and psychic frontier, the spectrum of how Americans have conceived of and oriented themselves to the other has long been exceptionally narrow, something akin to the pursuit of individual actualization vs a desired 'oneness' with the 'American people'. The meta-narrative of American national consciousness, Gunn writes, "depicts a single, solitary self...transplanted from another culture (and hence unfinished), or essentially unformed and uncultivated (and hence innocent), falling, so to speak, into experience and encountering there that ideal "Other" in response to which he must, at the minimum, redefine himself and, at the maximum, virtually recreate himself" (191). The geographical landscape of the New World, along with the cultural-religious background of the early settlers meant that 'frontier' was from the outset primarily cognized as that which tests, tempers and delivers the American 'self' from the corrosive legacy of old European values.

The ever-moving frontier and Frontierism, as Frederick Turner described it in the late nineteenth century¹¹³, was thus the symbolic site where the contradictions of isolation and belonging were most palpable. In essence, expanding further

¹¹³ See Turner's influential 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", in which he writes: "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character...In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave, the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (2-3).

westward the national "all" was simultaneously an enactment of frontier self-reliance and paradoxically a persistent counterforce to the definition of the self as a solitary unit constituted and sustained by its inner resources. Following Gunn's thesis then, the frontier represented the farthest reaches of American "imagination", where the "all" that comprised the known/familiar ended, as well as the belief that what lay beyond was a territory that, once civilized and *integrated*, would remake the "all" by infusing it with what was formerly—but no longer—other. A simpler and more recognizable metaphor for this conviction is, of course, the "melting pot", a phrase popularized by British playwright Israel Zangwill's 1908 play of the same name which portrayed America as an endless project of recreation through assimilation, in which the "all" would eventually include within itself every antagonism that presently lay beyond it. Journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845 entered into the American lexicon a more virulent version of this same conviction in the lead up to the Mexican-American war, the pernicious "Manifest Destiny". Again, the suggestion was clear: all that is now outside will soon be inside, the frontier will push ever forward until no darkness remains.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ An evocative visual representation of this ideology can be found in Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's famous 1861 painting *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, which depicts hardy settlers progressively cultivating a hostile and mountainous landscape on their way to a golden coastline. The painting is today prominently displayed in the US House of Representatives.

Although each of these propositions seem to regard the meaning of the frontier in the American case as singular and unique, I am less convinced. Frontierism is at its core, after all, an extension of the premise that *home* is demarcated from the rest of the world on the basis of familiarity. What is missing from the whole schema, as I have tried to explore in this dissertation, is the possibility of frontier as the site for encountering that which cannot be appropriated; the other is that that which always and irretrievably lies past the frontier, for otherwise it ceases to be other. The central metaphor of *Heart of Darkness* is that beyond the light there is always darkness, a last frontier that marks what cannot be illuminated. The name for that darkness is *the other*.

To experience art is to live, for a moment, on this frontier. Gunn writes of an American culture "inured...to strangeness" (179), echoing Shklovsky's "over-automatization", by which we similarly inure ourselves to what is alien all around us. Gunn contemplates the value of being awakened, however briefly, to what he calls "wonder":

[I]t would appear that we [now] wonder, if at all, only about what is left to wonder at or wonder about. The imaginative capacity for wonder...requires a special openness to the unanticipated, a certain susceptibility to surprise, and most of us can no longer allow

ourselves to be so vulnerable. Instead of remaining receptive to novelty, we have become rotten-ripe with knowingness as the imagination's last defense in a world which, if experienced directly, might stun us back into the Stone Age.

As I have discussed herein, art is neither a specific object nor the act of uncovering the meaning of an object, but rather a moment in which we are able to briefly live again in an unfamiliar world. Through it, we are able to glimpse not light, but look into the darkness—not at the other of our imagination, but the one who forever lies beyond it. We are reconciled with wonder.

"Can you picture what will be,

so limitless and free?

Desperately in need of some stranger's hand

In a desperate land (The Doors 181)

-Jim Morrison

Final Thoughts

I began this dissertation with an exploration of otherness in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Forster's *A Passage to India*. I would like to conclude it with a brief return to these texts in light of the concerns I have raised in these pages.

The central events of Forster's novel, the false rape accusation and trial of Doctor Aziz, are set into motion by Adela and Mrs. Moore experiencing in the Marabar caves otherness as a primordial challenge. The confusion about what actually happened in the caves propels the story and its characters towards potential tragedy, the conviction of an innocent man as a victim of colonialist injustice. But this outcome is averted when, at the outset of Doctor Aziz's trial, Adela (Aziz's accuser), has a "vision" of the caves which causes her to doubt her version of events and, instead of testifying to Aziz's guilt, she exonerates him instead.

We are presented here, at the trial, with a second moment of confusion to match the one in the caves, where truth and recollection come into question, though this one corrects the distortions of the first. This second moment is more subtle in its origins. In place of the cave system, in which what happens is literally lost in darkness, Adela's crisis of conviction at the trial seems to ensue from a particular sight she beholds just as the proceedings begin. As if like an omen, the first thing she notices upon entering the courtroom is a solitary figure who operates a *punkah*, a handheld fan (204). This "punkah-wallah" (fan operator), though he remains entirely mute through the trial proceedings and has nothing whatsoever to do with them besides, is the first and last image Forster chooses to frame the trial episode.

The terms he uses to describe the man are at once overtly deific and extremely Orientalist, as if under the Occidental gaze the hyper-sexualized subaltern body is assigned an opacity that nonetheless, as an object, renders it transparent:

Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back...he caught her attention as she came in, and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then

nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god...Pulling the rope towards him, relaxing it rhythmically, sending swirls of air over others, receiving none himself, he seemed apart from human destinies, a male Fate, a winnower of souls...he scarcely knew that he existed and did not understand why the Court was fuller than usual, indeed he did not know that it was fuller than usual, didn't even know he worked a fan, though he thought he pulled a rope. Something in his aloofness impressed the girl from middle-class England, and rebuked the narrowness of her sufferings. (204-205)

Like a master of ceremonies, the *punkah wallah's* presence in the courtroom seems both unconnected to and above everyone else. His vantage point overlooks the diorama, yet without seeing it. Adela pauses to consider him at some length before her testimony, and his presence seems to cast a pall over her. He is there before we arrive at the scene and when the trial concludes he remains behind, as though he had always existed there. He is, in short, a living embodiment of the Marabar caves (and, equally, of Conrad's anthropomorphized Congolese jungle), in that he is similarly positioned against the anxieties and excitations of the English protagonists as a silent and eternal witness. His indifference, or rather his radically inaccessible

alterity, seems to swallow up Adela's confidence in her own narrative perspective, and looking upon him she loses control over her recollection of what happened in the caves.

There is a crucial paradox in this, a cohabitation of seemingly opposing meanings within the figure of the *punkah wallah*. He is on the one hand literally and symbolically defined by Orientalist objectification and desire. He plays no actual part in the drama in the courtroom and has no agency even in his own actions. As Jenny Sharpe has commented, he is written as the silenced other who does not intend the world around him in the same way as those around him whose gaze constitutes him. Though he seems to awaken something in Adela's memory, Sharpe rightly argues that the *punkah wallah* "has no access the paths of truth along which he guides her, for he cannot cognize what is transpiring around him, not even his own activity of fanning" (150). If Forster's titular passage represents in a sense the distance between the colonizer as subject and the colonized object (as Aziz's struggle in the novel suggests), the *punkah walla* surely resides on the far end of this passage.

On the other hand, in diametrical opposition to this interpretation, the same figure also most directly marks the *limitations* of the Orientalist gaze, i.e. the point where its domain ends (and the proverbial darkness begins). The *punkah wallah* exists at (and signifies), in Russon's terms, the "site

of exposure", the edge where familiar (home) encounters the alien (outside). He is the boundary between Marlow's river and the forest beyond, or the treeline through which Piscine watches Richard Parker disappear. For Adela, he demarcates the extent of her ability to consume otherness, the end of the 'passage' and the marker where radical alterity begins. The coexistence of these aspects within the same figure, I believe, is what unnerves Adela to the point that it precariously subverts her self-assuredness. She sees suddenly a multi-stranded truth, an infinitely unassimilable subject within an entirely totalized and automatized object. The familiar affixed to the defamiliarized. She has had, we might say, an artistic experience, a forestalling of automatization.

Passage anchors itself on these two disruptions, which create and then resolve the novel's narrative tension by the same means. In the courtroom, as in the caves, the narrative and ontological authority that underwrite the very project of colonialism are interrupted by an alterity which, as Levinas tells us, does not in itself satiate a lack nor bend to the outthrust of desire. Conrad's river similarly carries Marlow beyond his purview as a self-determining subject, further away from epistemological control over the other, i.e. as either the likeness or antithesis of the self, over darkness as the mere opposite of light. Indeed, Adela's anxiety is voiced not only by

Kurtz's "horror" but also by Victor Frankenstein disavowing the "wretch", somehow both more and less than human. Ahab, in the guise of Job, is confounded by the same refusal of the other, the whale, to answer for itself, as Piscine is by his failure to achieve a familiarity with the anthropomorphic Richard Parker which burns away the tiger's animal obscurity.

Each of these texts, as I have argued, position otherness at its most fundamental as an outlier within experience, in the sense that it subverts the autonomy of the self. As Hegel's dialectic describes, the dual movement of the self as *I* emerges from and is contingent upon the imminence of otherness. But, moreover, this also implies that otherness is an enduring trauma felt within the tautology of self, whose immanence alienates the Kantian subject from a stable delimitation of its own boundaries. Manto's Bishan Singh and DeLillo's Keith Neudecker are so visited by an other not only counterpoised to the self, but one that unties the latter's hold on *I am I*.

Kamel Daoud's complex response to Camus' *The Stranger*, which sets out to refute the latter but finds itself reliving its predecessor's self-destructive impulses, raises further questions about the other as a colonial subject. *Meursault* is a novel that exists in the negative space opened up by the collision of two polarities, its action and protagonist drawn over the contours of its opposite number. Daoud's protagonist,

in writing 'back' to the colonizing world, reaches the uncomfortable realization that he cannot orient himself in opposition to something without being connected to it. Desai's Baumgartner similarly embodies Bhabha's notion of hybridity, as well as the indivisibility of identity and alterity, which is possessed by neither of two halves but is rather a surplus created by the separation.

I have focused in these conversations on contemporary literature, 'western' and 'eastern', while also broadly considering art as discourse, as conduit. The basic intervention of art, I have argued, is in obfuscation rather than explication; art (the image) points at its referent object without replicating it, which both separates art from analytical essentialization and, paradoxically, preserves what is ineffable and indescribable within experience. The realization of Woolf's Bernard, the desire for a "howl" that expresses without mediation or signification, is echoed by Trinh's documentary and narrative technique of sidelong looking, speaking not about the other but "nearby". Maurice Blanchot's contemplation of an "essential" language of art, which eschews the crude utilitarianism of everyday speech, similarly reaches for a way to speak about the nocturnal world of Levinas' primeval *il y a* without the trappings of self-referential ontologization.

Art, in the specific sense to which I have delimited herein

(of the phenomenological object that introduces, in Shklovsky's terms, a "slowness"), performs this very same role in amongst the economy and familiarity of otherwise habituated objects. To come into contact with art is to be disarmed of the ability to allocate objects into an economized continuity, to be re-awakened to the strangeness of phenomenal experience. A more robust (or stable) definition of art would thus become immediately obsolete and ossified; the nature of the artistic experience is that it is always *experiential*, living in the unaccounted interstices between subject and object. Art is, in Russon's phraseology, an experience of exposure, and its parameters are therefore continually contested and in flux. What is unfamiliar on one occasion might suddenly—or over time—become commonplace, its power to compel us disappearing without warning or gradually ebbing away. As Danto correctly surmised, such drastically pluralized and inclusive metrics essentially render art a redundant category, so far as questions like 'what is art' and 'what is good art' are concerned. However, what is purchased at this admittedly steep price is the possibility of an infinite number of small epiphanies within experience—art as a persistent check against the benumbing of consciousness. In being intruded and thus displaced, we are by art, as by the other, impelled toward awareness. We are alive, for a moment, for the other.

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